

ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

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THE TALE OF AUNT MARGARET'S TROUBLE.

IN SIX WEEKLY PORTIONS. FIRST PORTION.

CHAPTER I.

I SUPPOSE that, to be successful, one should see only one side of the object to be attained. At all events, I believe this to have been my sister Anna's case; and she succeeded, if to gain what one strives for, be success. Now that I have written those words, they scarcely seem to convey my meaning. Perhaps I should have expressed it better, if I had written—but no; let it stand as it is.

The reverse of the medal has been my stumbling-block through life. I have always allowed my imagination to busy itself too much with what might be said against, as well as for, any plan, purpose, or speech, of mine. But at this quiet twilight-time of my life, and in these pages which will not be read until the twilight shall have deepened into night, and the night—as I reverently hope—shall have brightened into the dawn of a heavenly day, I resolve to keep but one object in view, and to endeavour to attain it in all simplicity and single-mindedness. And this is my object, Lucy. I want you to know the true story of those who have gone before you, and who have nurtured your youth. The story of two women, who were once young, as you are now young; who lived, and loved, and suffered, as you must one day live, and love, and suffer. I have little hope that our warning beacon will avail to keep you from the rocks. The records of our common humanity date back ages and ages beyond the days of my youth, Lucy—though I dare say your twelve-year-old imagination can hardly conceive a time when Aunt Margaret was young!—and yet I never heard of a case in which one human being's heart-experience served to teach any but himself or herself. We are truly the "heirs of all the ages" in one sense. Science bequeathes its treasures of research and labour. Intellect stumbles, and wavers, and sometimes falls, but progresses, still progresses. The pioneers of thought do good service; and noble band after band, succeeding each other, have hewn out paths

for us, on which we travel contentedly, with scant gratitude to, or thought of, the hewers. But, in the science of Life, we must all begin for ourselves where our great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers began. Just as to-morrow will bring with it the same sequence of morning, noon, and night, that dawned, and flamed, and faded, in Eden. Still, it will be well that you should one day know the truth of a family story which you are as yet too young thoroughly to understand. It will be well if it make you think gently and pitifully of the dead; if it help you to see that "nought's had, all's spent, if our desire be got without content;" and, above all, if it convince you that unless your desire be a worthy one, its attainment can assuredly never, never, bring content.

Your grandmother was my sister Anna; that sister of whom I have said that she succeeded in gaining what she strove for. You never saw her after you were an infant two years old, and I know not how I can make you picture to yourself my sister—the sister of pale, wrinkled, grey-haired Aunt Margaret—as a bright, handsome, brilliant girl, full of life, and with a wonderfully high and haughty spirit. She had dark brown eyes of my colour, but larger and brighter—eyes that flashed and sparkled, and sometimes shone with too fierce a lustre when she was excited or angry. She was somewhat shorter than I, but bore herself so erectly as to seem the taller of the two. There was a family likeness between us; but I was never a beauty, while Anna always was. We were brought up together by a guardian; for our parents died when I was five, and Anna three years old. Our father and mother were taken away by the same infectious fever within a fortnight of each other. I have been told—my remembrance of that time is too vague for me to speak of my own knowledge—that our mother died first in delirium, all unconscious of the fond and faithful hand which clasped her to the last; and that from that moment our father, who had kept up to tend and nurse her, drooped and sickened, and seemed to yield himself to death. What hurt him most, was, that she should not have recognised him at the end, nor said one word of farewell; and I think the very last words he spoke were, "Phæbe will know me when I see her, now!" They used to say I was like him. Well! Our guardian came,

and took us away from the desolate house, and we soon forgot our brief sorrow, and found a warm soft nest to dwell in, two little unfledged innocents that we were, from whom the sheltering mother-wings had taken flight so soon, for ever.

I have used the term "our guardian," for so he was truly and faithfully; but I do not mean that he was ever legally appointed so; nor, indeed, were we of importance enough to have a guardian appointed for us. We had no treasure, and needed no dragon to guard it; but God sent us a friend who, though there was nothing else to take care of, took care of us from pure love and compassion. He was the husband of my mother's half-sister, a woman many years older than my mother, and he had known and loved both my parents. Childless themselves, he and his wife had often begged—half in jest, half in earnest—to have one of us little ones, to rear as their own. Anna was their favourite—as she was most people's—such a pretty plump thing as she was, with great eyes, and delicate rings of dark brown hair curling over her forehead! But they would have been glad to take either of us. They have often told me that father used to say laughingly, "Wait till I die, Jim, and I'll leave you one of them in my will." Poor father! Mother was passionately eager to have a son, and had even, I believe, made a half-promise that, if ever a boy were born to her, one of us inferior creatures should be transferred to the Gable House. But I do not think that any number of brothers would have pushed us from our places in father's heart. It was hoped at first that there might be some small provision for us, when his affairs were finally wound up. No one expected that we could have much; but his practice had been a large one, and he had lived simply, and had had no selfish expenses. However, beyond the small sum obtained by the sale of the furniture and books, we had literally nothing. A country surgeon, if he be one of those good Samaritans to whom the sight of helpless suffering is the most effectual appeal that can be made, and who will not only prescribe the healing oil and cordial wine, but bestow them, if need be, is seldom rich. And my father was still young and strong when the fever felled him. He looked not for death. How many of us do expect his coming, even though the journey have been long, and the road stretch far behind us? Uncle Gough carried us home, Anna and me, in our little black frocks; and Aunt Gough kissed us, and cried over us, and took us into her heart, and filled a mother's place to us, while she lived.

I remember that, from the first, Anna was the more masterful of us two. What she desired, she desired so eagerly; what she aimed at, even in our childish days, she pursued with so blind a vehemence of passion; that weaker will unconsciously drew aside, and ceased from offering any obstacle to her course. It was bad for Anna,

this yielding on the part of those around her. I have sometimes thought, that if our parents had lived, Anna and others might have been spared the bitter sorrows which afterwards wrecked more than one life. And yet the expression of that thought seems so like a reproach to the memory of the beloved guardians of our youth, that I cannot bear to say so. But the fault, if fault there were, lay in the excessive tenderness of Aunt and Uncle Gough. They had so resolved that the orphans should never miss the sweetness of a mother's love, should never feel, even for an instant, the chill of orphanhood and strangeness in their new home, that they shrank from the remotest semblance of harshness, and wielded their authority with a gentleness which seemed almost feeble.

CHAPTER II.

THE new home that received us was delightful in its outward aspect. It was a very old building, and the good fortune or good taste of its successive occupants had preserved it almost in its original condition. I have never, in England, seen so perfect and picturesque a specimen of an ancient dwelling-house, except in the good old town of Shrewsbury. Uncle Gough's residence was, however, situated in a quite different quarter of England, in a smiling southern county, and within twenty miles of the sea. It was, I believe, the largest, and was most certainly the noblest-looking house in the little town of Willborough, and it stood in spacious grounds of its own. The lawn and gardens and orchards extended back a considerable distance; but the front of the house was quite near enough to the main street of the town for its numerous gables to be well seen from thence above the high brick walls which surrounded it; and the great old iron entrance-gate gave to view the hall door, with its quaint overhanging porch and the stone benches within it on either side, whereon, in fine sunny weather, might often be seen a heap of children's books and toys, with, perhaps, a small straw hat or a crumpled sash, the whole zealously guarded by the tiniest, fieriest, uncanniest-looking black-and-tan terrier that was ever beheld. For, this great porch was Anna's favourite playing-place, and Vixen was her favourite playmate. The porch was a constant *casus belli*,—not between Anna and Aunt Gough, for the dear soul would let the child have her way when she fancied her heart was set upon littering the stone benches and pursuing her pastimes in full view of all the passers-by in the High-street. But old Stock, uncle's factotum and absolute tyrant, strongly objected to what he called the unseemliness of poor Anna's selected haunt. He was a queer wooden-looking old man, whose real business was that of a gardener, but who seemed to fancy he had a sort of vested right in every inch of Uncle Gough's territory which lay outside the thick panels of the hall door. Beyond that, into

the house itself, he never pushed his authority; but once set your foot on the broad slab of stone under the entrance-porch, and you entered the domains of King Stock, or, as we children used to call him when we came to the days of Æsop's Fables, King Stork. Certainly that long-legged monarch himself could not have been more absolute, or more superbly indifferent to the inclinations of his subjects. Stock's highest word of praise was "seemly." I have heard him call the great snowy sea of apple blossoms in the orchard, flushed by a red sunset, "a seemly sight." In the same way, if Stock pronounced any person, place, or thing, to be "unseemly," we all knew that he meant to convey a very strong expression of condemnation. I have sometimes thought he fancied the word to be scriptural, and to carry with it a weight of solemnity beyond any mere mundane or usual phrase. However that may have been, I know that he and Anna had many and many a battle about that unfortunate porch. "Why, Miss Anna," he would say, with slow utterance and wooden immovable face, "when you've got the larn"—so he called the lawn—"and the gardens, and the scrubbery, and the orchard, and the medders, for to play in, take what you likes and spile what you likes, wha'tiver possesses you to come and litter and mess all over this here porch, with your pictur-books and your ties (toys)? And that little scratting beast of a Vixen, that I'd rather 'ave 'ad a dozen barn-door fowl on the gravel-drive this mornin', and the marks of her paws all over them stone benches! 'Tisn't seemly, I tell ye. Do what you likes in the house. There's more old rooms and passages in the top story nor you'd trot through on your small pettoes in a week. But in this porch you shall not be; for 'tis an unseemly thing, and there an end."

But there was by no means an end. Anna would stamp her small scarlet-shod foot (children wore red morocco shoes in those days), and would knit her delicate baby eyebrows, and would throw herself furiously on the bench beside her treasures at the least hint of an attempt to remove them; while Vixen would bark and snap, and dart forward with short spiteful leaps of defiance, and the two would be so shrill and shrewish that the fray generally ended in the child and the dog being left panting, but victorious, in possession of the field. Once only, old Stock—who never turned a hair, as the phrase goes, in these combats, but was outwardly as cool and unruffled as his small foe was flushed and dishevelled—adopted the extreme measure of lifting up the refractory one, screaming with rage, in his arms, and carrying her deliberately to my uncle in the library for instant punishment; while Vic, small of body, but great of spirit, hung on by her teeth to the calf of his leathern gaiter with all four legs off the ground at once. Ludicrous as the scene was, our kind guardians were so frightened by Anna's violence, and so unwilling to deny her the gratification of any wish, that

Stock's appeal resulted in total defeat for him, and triumph and consolation for his enemy, in the shape of an orange and a bright silver sixpence. Dear, dear Uncle Gough! How tender he was, how pitiful, how patient, with the helpless motherless children he had taken to be as his own.

From that day forth, Stock never sought to interfere with Anna's choice of a playing-place. I believe she was the only creature who, within the memory of men, had successfully fought Stock on his own territory; and it might have been expected that he would be implacable against his pigmy conqueror. But it was not so. I believe he was afterwards doubly stern in asserting his authority against all the rest of the world, and I have an indistinct remembrance of Uncle Gough's having been obliged to yield up certain celery-beds which Stock chose to disapprove of, as a peace-offering to his outraged dignity. But I do not think Stock was more harsh with Anna after her victory than before. Indeed, I used to fancy that he almost liked her the better for it. On one occasion, I ventured to tread some little way in my sister's footsteps, emboldened by the success of her rebellion; but my audacity received so prompt and severe a check as effectually quenched any rising aspiration I might have had to do battle with "King Stock," presumptuous little minion that I was! It happened in this wise. We had been racing and romping through the grounds all the morning of one bright summer day, and towards noon were thoroughly heated and weary. Nurse had carried off Anna, half cross and whole sleepy, for a nap before our early dinner. I, being two years older, and not so delicate and easily tired as my sister, was left to follow my own devices until it should be time to wash and brush me for dinner. Under these circumstances, and while still undecided how to bestow myself during the next hour, my eye caught the broad island of shadow cast by the porch on the dazzling space of yellow gravel that lay glaring in the sunshine before the house. A graceful Virginia creeper hung lightly over the entrance, and the porch looked so deep and mysterious in its blackness of shade, that I thought of a certain cave in a wood that I had been told of in some fairy tale of surpassing interest, and the idea occurred to me how delightful it would be to play at being the enchanted maiden who was kept prisoner by the wicked fairy, compelled to remain spell-bound and motionless in the cave until the handsomest prince in all the world should come and touch her with a branch of the magic linden-tree, when she was to arise and marry the prince, and live happy ever after! There was a great golden-blossomed laburnum on one side of the porch, and that would do very well for the linden-tree, and would be much prettier. So off I ran in hot haste to the "wilderness"—as our play-room was significantly christened—and returned flushed and

happy to the porch, with my doll and a white woolly lamb on wheels, whereof the uninitiated could never, at first sight, distinguish the head from the tail, much to my chagrin. Dolly was not so beautiful a work of art as your waxen baby, Lucy. She was large and clumsy, cut out of wood, with crimson-varnished cheeks, and her hair conspicuously attached to her skull by a bright tin tack in the middle of the parting; but she was very dear to my childish heart for all that, and, for a power of Protean versatility, and assumption of the most widely differing characters, I would match her against the choicest and costliest puppets of France or Germany. Well! I came back to the porch, carrying Dolly and Snowball. Snowball, the woolly lamb, was an innovation, there being no such character in the original story; but I constructed in my mind an episode showing how Snowball, in endeavouring to defend his beloved mistress, had incurred the wicked fairy's wrath, and had been condemned to share her captivity: so his presence in the cave was satisfactorily accounted for. I covered Dolly's head and shoulders with a pink silk scarf from my own neck, and immediately she became as magnificent and malignant a fairy as could be desired. Then I lay down on the cool stone bench, with my arms round Snowball's neck, and waited for Prince Goldenheart with his branch of linden.

The shade and the silence, and my morning's romp, combined to make me drowsy. I was just beginning to lose the sensation of Snowball's rough wool against my cheek, when a slow heavy step on the gravel outside startled me into wakefulness, and I sat up very quietly and peered out under the hanging screen of Virginia creeper. Of course it was old Stock. I had known his step at once. He was going towards the garden, and carried a heavy spade over his shoulder. The porch was so dark, and the outer sunlight so dazzling, that I think he would have passed by without seeing me, had it not been for poor Dolly, who, true to her present character of the malignant fairy, was the means of getting me into trouble. I had stuck her up to keep guard over us at the entrance of the cave, and the glories of her pink scarf attracted Stock's attention. "Hulloa!" said he, looking in upon me, with his gnarled brown hand shading his eyes; "why, it's you, is it, Miss Margrit?" He spoke very sternly, and stooped as if to take up Dolly. "O, would you please not to touch her, Stock," said I, pleading eagerly; "she is the fairy Malevola, and I am Rosabella, and nobody can come into the cave without a branch of the magic linden-tree, and—" "Oho!" growled Stock, interrupting my explanation, and ruthlessly lifting the fairy Malevola by one leg, so that she dangled helplessly upside down, with her dishevelled locks revealing her bald wooden block of a head, except just where the tin tack held them on; "Oho! you are agoin' to set me at

defiance now, are you, Miss Margrit? If nobody can't go into the cave, somebody shall come out on it! Ain't you shamed to be flyin' in the faces of them as Providence has been pleased to call into that condition of life? Come along out this minute, you bad-behaved child." It so irritated me to see him slowly swinging Dolly backwards and forwards as he spoke, with her poor bald head ignominiously exposed to view, and her black curls sweeping the gravel, that I was goaded into resistance. "Give me my doll!" I cried, half astonished at my own audacity. She was no longer the fairy Malevola; there was no enchanted cave, no magic linden, no Prince Goldenheart. Ah, no. All that had vanished like a broken bubble. Stock had spoiled it all! But I clasped Snowball tightly under one arm, and held out the other for Dolly with an imperious gesture. "I WILL have her!" "Who says shall and will?" retorted Stock, with exasperating disregard of my demand. "You says shall and will, now; do you? Them ain't words for little child'en." "Dolly is mine, not yours," said I, struggling to keep down my tears, and clutching Snowball; "she is mine, my very own; and you have no right to keep her from me." "No right!" repeated Stock, aghast at this demonstration—"no right! If I was to come down so fur as to reason with a babe and suckling, I'd ask you what right you have to be a playin', and—a and a strayin'—in a place where you've been forbid for to play." Here he made a full stop; but added, after an instant, and with his usual deliberation, "—or for to stray." The logic of this retort struck me more forcibly than any mere scolding could have done. It was true I had been forbidden to bring my toys into the porch; but, next minute, there came into my mind the remembrance of Anna's victory, and I felt Stock's argument to be unsound. "Anna," said I, eagerly, "Anna was let to come here yesterday, and she cut the gravel with her skipping-rope; and if she has a right to be here, so have I." Stock turned his deep-set black eyes full upon me, and looked at me piercingly for a second or two. "Miss Margrit," said he, at last, "don't you arguey. Argueyment ain't meant for women folks, much more babes and sucklings. No good didn't never come on it. What they've got to do, is, just to mind what's said to them, and do it. That's the law and the prophets. You come out of that porch this minute, or I'll spie this here wooden image for good an' all." He lifted his heavy spade, and made as though he would have cut Dolly in two with it. I do not believe now that he would really have done so, for, though a harsh and crabbed old man, he was not brutal. But my childish heart leaped with terror when I saw the murderous weapon suspended over the smiling and unconscious Dolly; and, with a scream, I darted forth, caught the doll in my arms, and rushed away across the lawn at the back of the house, never stopping until I had plunged into

the thickest part of the shrubbery, where I flung myself sobbing on the grass, and hugged my rescued treasure.

More than sixty years have passed since that day when I so unsuccessfully emulated Anna—for I cannot have been much over seven years old—and yet every incident of it is far more vividly present to my mind than when I was five-and-twenty. I can recollect the bitter pungent taste of a spiky leaf from the old cedar-tree under which I lay; and the half-unconscious way in which I put it between my teeth, and pricked my lips with its sharp point. Ah, Lucy! Since that day I have dreamed day-dreams in other enchanted caves, and have been bound by stronger spells than the fairy Malevola's, and I have waited for Prince Goldenheart, as you will wait for him some day; and instead of the handsomest youth in all the world, with a fragrant green bough in his hand, there has hobbled up old Stock with his spade, to crumble the whole beautiful vision into dust! But then too, Lucy, I have never had the warmth of love and pity, and sympathy with suffering, quenched out of my heart, and, after all, I ought to be a happy old woman. And so I am, my dear. So I am.

We were happy in those days, if ever children were happy. As time went on, and we ceased to be mere babies, we were not allowed to run wild about the grounds from morning to night. But such tasks as were set us had no terrors, and few difficulties. I fear that you of the rising generation will have but a mean opinion of Aunt Gough's educational powers, when I confess that I was turned eight years old, before I could read with ease. But I had already worked several samplers, and could even stitch a shirt very creditably by that time. Anna's education began somewhat earlier, as was natural; for the two years' difference between our ages, enabled me to help her at first, in deciphering the mysteries of Great A and little b. Aunt Gough was a staunch church-woman. Every Sunday morning we were taken to the great family pew, and were perched up side by side on two crimson hassocks placed on the seat; and thus elevated, the brim of my hat just reached to the top of the pew. Anna, being smaller, was altogether invisible to the outside world, except when she stood up on her cushion during the psalms. There are scarcely any pews now-a-days. Everybody sits on a hard bench in full view of his or her neighbours. As it is certainly a much more uncomfortable state of things than the old fashion, let us hope it has some compensating spiritual advantages.

Anna and I liked going to church. It was not made terrible to our young imaginations, nor were we taught to think of religion as of a stern Medusa, whose contemplation turns the gazer into stone. As to giving us any portion of the Scriptures to learn by way of punishment, Aunt Gough would have been shocked at the notion of

such a thing. She did, indeed, consider it her duty to make us learn the Church Catechism,—which we didn't understand; and she told us stories from the New Testament—which we did understand, and, moreover, delighted in. One great source of Sunday pleasure was the music. Our church possessed a very fine old organ; and though our organist would not be considered very scientific in these days, he contrived to elicit from it its mellowest tones and richest harmonies. He loved the grand old instrument, and thought more of his organ than of himself: which feeling—the self-forgetfulness of a true artist—communicated itself irresistibly to his hearers. Even we children were conscious of a beauty in the psalms and voluntaries, beyond the mere sound. And I remember once saying to our guardian, “I do like to listen to Mr. Dixon, he plays so kindly.”

As we grew older, and were thought to have got beyond the range of dear Aunt Gough's simple teaching, we were sent to a day-school in the town. Our schoolmistress, Miss Wokenham, was one of the tiniest women I ever saw. There was more than one child of eleven or twelve years old, in the school, who could look down on her from a superior height; and our plump rosy cheeks, and round arms, would seem quite coarse and clumsy—*rustic* as her phrase was then, for everything redolent of health and vigour, as well as for what was in itself rough and unpolished—beside Miss Wokenham's fragile elfish form. She was not old as I now reckon age—perhaps forty-five—but her antiquity was very venerable in my eyes then. Her hair was snowy white, but soft and shining, and wavy with natural curls; she had bright dark eyes, and an immensely wide mouth, filled, however, with a faultless set of teeth. Perhaps Miss Wokenham's attainments were really nothing very marvellous, but we all thought her a prodigy of learning. And, indeed, making all due allowance for the march of intellect in these days, I am inclined to believe that Miss Wokenham was mistress of some solid acquirements that one might seek for, vainly, among more showily accomplished governesses. She had a competent knowledge of history and geography, and a turn for arithmetic that was quite surprising; she had even, it was whispered, dabbled a little in the mathematics; and our parish clergyman, who had graduated at Cambridge, was wont to declare, that if Miss Wokenham had been a man, she would have made the wranglers of her year look to their laurels. But perhaps this was a figure of speech. At all events, Miss Wokenham herself used to declare it was; and she was a most absolutely and uncompromisingly truthful human being. If, as sometimes happened, a scholar thirsting for knowledge pushed her beyond her depth, she never hesitated for an instant to confess her ignorance. “I don't know, my dear,” she would say, fixing her brave black eyes earnestly on the interrogator: “I don't

know, but if it is to be known, we'll find it out." And then she would reach down the lexicon, or the atlas, or whatever book of reference might be needed, and work side by side with her pupil, until the desired information was gained. This candour, far from weakening her influence over us, had so diametrically opposite an effect, that we were one and all ready to swear to the positive certainty of anything imparted to us by Miss Wokenham as a fact.

Under her tuition I and Anna were well content to remain, until we were respectively seventeen and fifteen years old, with no more brilliant accomplishments than as much music as enabled us to rattle through a country dance or so, and a smattering of French imparted by a long-suffering Frenchman named De Beauguet, whom we persisted in irreverently styling Old Bogie. Anna had a lovely fresh voice, and used to thrill all our hearts with some old Border ballad, or a canzonet by Mr. Haydn, as we sat round the fire in the winter twilight. I sang too a little, but my voice had neither the power nor the charm of Anna's.

Meanwhile, things went on pleasantly and peacefully at the Gable House. If time began to streak Uncle Gough's hair with snow, and to deepen a line here and there in my aunt's comely face, the change was so gradual that we did not notice it. Perhaps old Stock altered as little as it was possible for any one to do, during a lapse of ten years. He had always seemed old since we had known him, so that was nothing new. He had always been brown-skinned, and stooping, and wrinkled, and crabbed, and he was so still; so *that* was nothing new. Poor old Stock! He seemed to have but one pleasure in life, unless his constant quarrels with every one around him afforded him gratification. His sole luxury was his pipe. He would sit by the kitchen fire of an evening, smoking his churchwarden filled with the strongest tobacco that could be bought, and talking theology to the maids; for Stock had decided views about religion. I used to think, when I was a child, that they were quite peculiar to himself; but I have heard in subsequent years dogmas gravely promulgated, which, barring the difference of grammar, might have emanated from old Stock himself.

Cook was the only one of the servants bold enough to tackle Stock on this, his strong point; but even she frequently retired worsted from the conflict. "Well," she would say, taking refuge in generalities: "I'm sure I don't know, Mr. Stock, but I've allays believed as them as acted accordin' to their consciences was in the right way. There's more nor one road to heaven, you know."

"Heaven!" Stock would repeat, with a growl of contempt. "Much *you* knows about heaven!"

"Deary me, bless us and save us, Mr. Stock! I hopes I knows as much about heaven as you do, any way."

"I'm one of the 'lect, I am," the old man would say: his face wooden as ever, and his utter-

ance deliberate and weighty as with a sense of absolute conviction: "I'm all right. There'll be me and one or two more on us there, but there'll be vary few on us—*vary* few on us."

I remember the curious speculations this kind of talk used to excite in my mind. I never for a moment believed that Stock was right, but I used to wonder with the vague curiosity of a thoughtful child how he would feel when he found so many more people in heaven than he expected, and whether he would be pleased or disappointed at not finding it reserved for the exclusive occupation of himself and "one or two more on us."

A FRENCH OFFICER ON THE ENGLISH ARMY.

HAVING now brought my prolonged sojourn in England to an end, I write in Paris the results of my private inspection, as I shall call it, of the English army: a force of which we Frenchmen in general understand very little. Before entering into details, let me bear witness to the great kindness and unvaried hospitality I received everywhere in the United Kingdom from every military man I met with. We Frenchmen often say, and still more generally believe, that Englishmen are haughty, supercilious, and utterly careless respecting the opinions of strangers. My experience teaches me exactly the reverse. If I were to note down half the acts of kindness I received from officers of the English army during my residence in their country, I might fill this space twice over, and yet leave much untold; and if I had remained to eat a third of the dinners to which I was invited, I must have remained at least a year longer from France, instead of the few months I passed in English garrison towns. It is true that I carried with me several very good letters of introduction, but the kindness shown me seemed always shown because I was a Frenchman and an officer of the French army. Moreover, whenever I mixed with English officers—and that more particularly among the seniors, the true John Bulls as we should call them in Paris—the conversation was invariably, though with great delicacy, and as if by accident, led into some channel which brought about praise of the French army, from my hosts. The way we fought in the Crimea, our sufferings and conquests in Algeria, the results of our campaigns in Italy, were almost invariably introduced for the evident purpose of giving me pleasure. Neither at the table of the "Guides,"* nor in a barrack of the Chasseurs d'Afrique, would the praises of our army be more eloquently—though calmly and earnestly—sounded than at the mess-tables of English regiments where I have dined.

In France we have an idea that English

* A "crack" French Hussar corps so called, and belonging to the Imperial Guard.

officers drink a great deal, and that they seldom leave the table quite sober. This may possibly have been the case in the times when hard drinking was the fashion among all ranks, but it is not so now. I never saw but one officer at a mess-table who was the least intoxicated, and this was a very young man who had that day won a large sum in betting upon some famous race.

English officers—that is, all the unmarried officers of a regiment—dine together at the same table, and the dinner is called “the mess.” The same system, with the same name, has of late years been introduced into the Imperial Guard in France; but it is by no means popular with us, and I should be sorry to see it extended in our service. In the first place, our regiments consisting of three battalions instead of one as is the case in the English army, we could hardly find accommodation for so large a body of officers, combined with the necessary comfort. Then, again, a “mess,” as it is established in the English army, with mess plate, mess furniture, mess wines, and all that is requisite for keeping up an establishment, entails considerably more expense than a plain dinner at a provincial town “pension,” or hotel. At Lyons, Marseilles, Grenoble, or Metz, my dinner and breakfast for the month never cost me more than seventy francs, or less than three pounds sterling, and this with quite enough good table wine at each meal. I have no luxury for that money, but I sit down with my brother field-officers, my brother captains, or my brother subalterns, as the case may be, and we have all we require, both in the quality and quantity of our food, and cleanliness of table arrangements. But an English mess, if an officer breakfast at it, and drink even a small quantity of wine, will never cost its members less than six francs a day, or a hundred and eighty francs a month.* Then, again, in the French service there does not exist that perfect equality of rank off duty, which is the rule in the English army. In a regiment of the latter, parade, or guard mounting, or “stables” once over, the commanding officer is the only person to whom any deference is shown by the other officers. The rest call each other by their surnames or christian names, as they may or may not be familiar with one another. The prefix of “captain” or “major,” as is the case with us when addressing a superior, is seldom or never heard in an English regiment, except on duty. In the English navy it is different. In that service, off duty as well as on, the inferior officer pays great respect to his superior, and with them, as in our army, all the different ranks do not dine together.

In the English army, except in the Foot Guards when stationed in London, the officers do not lodge out of barracks, as is the case in France.

English officers would often hardly credit me when I told them that our largest regiments, numbering perhaps two thousand four hundred men, would never have more than an adjutant, major, and the captain and subaltern on duty inside the barrack walls, except during the hours of duty, and never during the night. Unless he happens to be a married man, of which there are never more than four or five in a regiment, no officer in the English army can lodge out of barracks, nor can he, without special leave, be absent from the barracks all night. We have an idea in France that the English officers are much less with their men, and have far less to do, than in our service; but the exact contrary is the fact. In the English army the men are constantly being inspected by their officers for something or other, and are not left to themselves nearly so much as our soldiers are. It is possible that this constant supervision may be requisite in the English army, but I am inclined to think that it makes the troops more dependent upon others in the difficulties of a campaign, and tends to diminish that self-reliance which is evident in the ranks of our army, and which has helped our men so well in many emergencies. I will give an instance of what I mean. In the French army, once the rations of the regiment have been duly inspected and pronounced to be good, there is an end of looking after the food of the men. The quality of the supplies the administration is careful of; for the cooking, the men themselves are responsible; and this has the double good effect of making the men self-dependent, and avoiding that constant inspection of them which seems to me a mistake. Now, in the English army, the quality of the rations is inspected in the morning, before the rations are delivered:—much the same as with us. Then, each meal, as it is ready and cooked, is inspected, first by the orderly corporal of the company, then by the orderly sergeant of the company, a third time by the orderly sergeant of the regiment, and when served up in the barrack-rooms the orderly captain and subaltern go round to ask and see whether the men have any complaints to make. And yet, notwithstanding all this trouble, the English soldiers are not by any means as well fed as ours. Their breakfast and supper consist of tea and bread; their dinner alone being a meat meal, while our men have a good substantial breakfast and an equally good dinner. In many English regiments it is the custom on Sunday, in addition to the several inspections I have mentioned, to have the men’s dinners inspected by the lieutenant-colonel and the majors of the corps; and it is customary, I am told, in a number of corps that the men are obliged to sit down to their dinner buttoned up in uniform. Imagine what our soldiers, who when off duty never see any one of higher rank than the corporal of their room, would say to this constant supervision!

The chief difference between the two services lies, as I believe, in the fact that whereas

* Rather more than seven pounds, which our military readers will find to be rather an under than an over statement of the monthly mess expenses.

in the English army a corporal is considered as requiring education and intelligence but little better than a private, with us no soldier is made corporal until he has undergone an examination which proves him fit for any command. Let a corporal with us but behave himself well, and his promotion to the epaulet of a sub-lieutenant is but a question of time. Not so in the English army. There, a soldier may make an excellent corporal, and not be fit for the rank of sergeant; or he may do exceedingly well as a sergeant, and not be suited for a sergeant-major; or he may make a first-rate sergeant-major, and not be capable of commanding men as an officer. I saw an instance of this. I went to the inspection of a splendid hussar regiment at Colchester. The corps was about to embark for India; and the Prince of Wales, besides a great number of the élite of London society, came down to see it on parade for the last time in England for many years to come. When the manœuvres were over, a sergeant and a sergeant-major were called before the Prince, to receive medals of distinction, for good conduct. Both were perfect models of cavalry soldiers, as indeed was every hussar of that magnificent corps. One of these two soldiers, the sergeant, was noted as having been orderly to Lord Raglan in the Crimea, and as riding the same horse that had carried him through the Russian war. Now, it is twelve years since Lord Raglan died, and, as mere recruits are never selected for orderlies, it is but fair to conclude that this sergeant must have seen at least fifteen years' service. In our army he would have been at least a captain, and perhaps would have attained higher rank; but in the English army he was only a sergeant. Surely this very slow promotion, or rather this gulf which is seldom bridged over between the commissioned and the non-commissioned ranks, must be the source of discontent and of great reluctance on the part of many good men to serve.

Of the system by which commissions and promotions are purchased in the English army, and by which the officer who has not money is certain to be superseded by his junior who has, I hardly like to speak. It is so utterly foreign to all that we and every other army in Europe consider honourable and soldier-like (nay, it is so utterly contrary to the practice in the English navy, English artillery, English Indian army, English marine infantry, English engineers, and English marine artillery), that the only wonder is, that a right-thinking honourable nation can for a moment continue a plan so degrading and wrong. It will hardly be believed out of England, that without money no officer can be promoted in the English army, unless he may happen to succeed to a death vacancy. Thus, suppose a captain of a regiment wishes to retire from the service; if the senior lieutenant of the corps has passed the requisite examination, and can muster eleven hundred pounds (about twenty-seven thousand francs), he will get his promotion. But if he cannot raise this sum, no matter what are the examinations

he has passed, the next lieutenant on the list will get the captaincy; and if the second has not the amount, the third will get it, and so on. And in addition to these sums, which are called the "regulation prices" of commissions, large extra sums are given to induce officers to retire; so that promotion up to the rank of lieutenant-colonel is, in the English army, a mere question of money. A lieutenant-colonel of English cavalry told me that his several grades had cost him about twelve thousand pounds, or three hundred thousand francs, and that unless an officer was prepared to pay that amount for his different promotions, he must never hope to command a cavalry regiment in the English service. This system is the great bane of the English army. On the one hand, it prevents poor men (whether from the ranks of the army or from civil life) from hoping to get on in the service. On the other hand, even those who do expend these immense sums cannot often afford to remain until they are made general officers, for if they do so, all they have paid is lost. The result is, that nearly all lieutenant-colonels either retire from the service or retire upon half-pay, in order to realise, at any rate, a part of what they have paid for their commissions, and so all the military experience they have gained is lost to the State. In short, promotion is with the wealthy officers a plaything which they will pay anything to obtain; once obtained, they are obliged ere long to sell it again, as being too expensive to keep.

To us Frenchmen (who are accustomed to look upon promotion as to be gained by honourable service, by seniority, or by distinction in the field), this turning of army honours into mere shares, as it were, which are to be bought and sold, appears simply detestable. So long as it continues, I am persuaded that the English army will never be what it might be, and that no other reforms in their military system will, or can be, of much avail. Its existence is the cause of an extraordinary system of promotion called *brevet*, which takes some little time to understand, and which confused me not a little. With us, a captain is a captain and nothing more. If he be rewarded by promotion, he is made a chef d'escadron or a chef de bataillon* either in his own or in another corps, as the case may be; so is he promoted in the English navy, from one rank to another. But not so in the English army. Regimental promotion, save in the exceptional cases of death vacancies, or the augmentations of a regiment, or the formation of a new corps, is not in the gift of the military authorities. When an officer has to be rewarded with promotion, he gets *brevet* advancement. Thus: an officer may be only a captain in his *regiment*, but may have the *brevet* rank in the *army* of major, lieutenant-colonel, and even colonel. So long as he is with his

* A chef d'escadron in the cavalry, or a chef de bataillon in the infantry, corresponds with the rank of major in the English army.

regiment alone, this brevet rank does not tell; but whenever his corps is in garrison with another regiment, or part of a regiment, he has a right to assume his army rank. An English officer told me of an extraordinary anomaly of this kind which happened in India some years ago. A captain in a cavalry regiment, who, from having been mentioned in general orders when on the staff, had attained the *brevet* rank of colonel, took command, by virtue of his seniority, of a whole brigade of cavalry before the enemy: thus superseding all the field-officers of his own and of every other regiment of cavalry. When the campaign was over, he rejoined his regiment, and did duty again as a simple captain. I have myself seen in Dublin, and at the camp at Aldershot, many officers who were one day doing duty as captain with their regiments, and the next day were visiting the guards as field-officers of the day. In the French army we could hardly understand such an extraordinary anomaly, but it seems an almost indispensable evil in an army where *regimental* promotion can only be bought and sold, and is really not in the hands of the authorities to bestow. There must be some means of rewarding service, distinction, or valour, in every army. With us, it is done substantially; that is, when an officer does anything by which he can claim promotion, he is duly rewarded by real promotion.

An officer of one of the regiments at Aldershot took me over the quarters of a hussar regiment but lately returned from India. As is usual in the English cavalry, nothing could be finer or cleaner than the men and the horses, nor could anything exceed the politeness with which the officers received me. But there was pointed out to me an individual whose position in the army is a commentary on the English system of promotion. This was the senior lieutenant of the corps: a gentleman who had been thirty years in the army, had worked through all the grades from private hussar to lieutenant, had seen service in the Crimean campaign, as well as throughout the great Indian mutiny. In actual service he was senior to every officer in the regiment, including the colonel, by several years. And yet, as he had not the money wherewith to purchase the rank of captain, he had only a death-chance of promotion. In his own regiment, or in any other corps, the Queen of England herself could only promote him by making him a present of from two to three thousand pounds. I was told that this gentleman was an excellent soldier in every respect, and much liked by his brother officers. There is in England a military newspaper called the *Army and Navy Gazette*, the editor of which is a gentleman who was correspondent of the *Times* newspaper before Sebastopol. This paper is looked upon as almost semi-official on military and naval matters, and its opinion is highly respected. In its columns the abolition of this abominable purchase system is often advocated; but there is a class of officers who uphold what seems, to all other nations and

armies in Europe, a disgrace to the English uniform.

The uniforms and accoutrements of the English army have been greatly changed for the better since I saw their battalions in the Crimea. Their cavalry is now almost perfect in dress, arms, and saddlery; their artillery, both horse and foot, the same; but their infantryman is still the very worst dressed foot-soldier in Europe, without any exception, and yet, with their scarlet tunics, they might have the most showy battalions in the world. They adhere to the old-fashioned white belt which we have long discarded, and they still retain the heavy pouch, bearing all its weight across the chest. The officers dress in blue tunics, save on rare occasions; when they wear scarlet, the distinction of their rank is so difficult to perceive as to be almost impossible. In their blue tunics there is no distinction whatever of rank, except for the field-officers. This is the more singular, as I have observed that in the English navy the distinctions of rank are all marked, in both dress and undress, so plainly that no one can mistake them. The English infantry officer's scarlet tunic is in the very worst taste, with plasterings of lace about the collar, the tails, and the cuffs, which serve no possible purpose except to add to the expense. Across the chest they wear a red scarf or sash, which is as useless as it is ugly, and they also adhere to the white leather sword-belt. Then they have a third uniform: a scarlet jacket, worn open, with a waistcoat, which is the dinner costume. Surely a plain scarlet frock, with no lace but to mark rank—say on the sleeve, as in their navy—with epaulets for full dress, the red scarf abolished, a black sword-belt for undress, and a gold one for full dress, would be a better-looking and a more simple costume. I have always noticed that the greater variety of uniforms a soldier has the more certain he is to be more or less shabby. An old coat and a new one, both of the same make and pattern, are sufficient. An officer may certainly have such additions as epaulets, gold lace, belt, and so forth, for greater occasions; but he should never have but one garment, and, more particularly, should always wear the same colour as his men. I saw a battalion of the Guards at drill in Hyde Park. The men wore undress jackets of white cloth; the officers, blue-braided hussar-looking frock-coats. No stranger could have guessed that the officers and men belonged to the same corps.

English officers seem to dislike all uniforms in general, and scarlet uniforms in particular. I observe that on every possible occasion, the moment he is off duty, the first thing an English officer does, is, to divest himself of his uniform, and to put on—often very curious-looking—plain clothes. To wear these plain clothes, even officers of rank will risk being reprimanded by their superiors. The difference of a general officer, or the colonel of a regiment, being liked or disliked, is very often determined by the fact of his allowing plain clothes to be worn,

or otherwise, by those under his command. This is a very singular fact; and is all the more curious, inasmuch as young men will move heaven and earth to obtain nominations to the army, and will afterwards avoid as much as they possibly can ever showing themselves in public in the distinctive dress of their profession. To hear an English officer talk about the annoyance of having to wear his full dress (the scarlet tunic) for a few hours, you would imagine that this full dress consisted of a heavy suit of ancient armour. In the main, English officers perform their duty strictly and well; but their uniform they dislike and avoid.

The soldiers and non-commissioned officers in the cavalry are well dressed, but the infantry are not. They still wear the long trousers, which have been abolished in the ranks of nearly every European infantry. And yet, curious enough, the English volunteer corps wear short trousers (called knickerbockers), which, with their leather leggings, is the best marching dress I have seen. It is better than what is now worn in our infantry, for it is not so heavy, and is much easier to put on.

In France we have an idea that in the English army the soldiers are tyrannised over by their officers. This is a great mistake. It is true that one seldom, if ever—I should perhaps say never—sees an English officer talking with a soldier or non-commissioned officer, as is often the case in our army. The customs and rules of their service forbid it, and in their ranks there are seldom to be found private soldiers of the same social standing in civil life as themselves. This is not the case with us. I have known many instances where one brother would be a lieutenant or a captain, and the other a private, or corporal, or sergeant, in the same corps. In England this would never be. But still there is a very great deal of good feeling, and even of liking, between the different ranks; and the officers spend freely, from their own pockets, considerable sums for the amusements of the men.

There is one thing which I greatly admire in the English army, and that is the readiness with which their troops embark for long years of colonial service. Our men would go singing to an attack at which two-thirds of their number must in all probability be swept away by the enemy's cannon; but they never would go for ten or twelve years to India, the Cape of Good Hope, or New Zealand, as the English soldier does, without a murmur. The regiment of hussars which I saw the Prince of Wales review at Colchester, had among its officers several men of large fortune, and yet, although they might have exchanged into other corps remaining at home, they were all about to embark in a body for India, where, as I was told, they would have to do duty for ten years. A French regiment would have done this gladly, if there had been any prospect of active service, or promotion, or glory, but they would never have done it merely from a stern sense of duty. This is but another instance serving to show

what a very fine army might be made of British troops, if a few wholesome changes were introduced into their system.

MASKS, FACES, AND BLANKS.

DID any one ever see a real human face? I who ask this question am not a maniac; neither am I blinder than my neighbours—indeed not so blind as some who persist in taking scarecrows for heroes, and a bundle of rags for royal robes of the deepest purple; but though not insane and not blind, I affirm in sober earnestness that faces are not to be seen as an every-day sight in this world, and that what we do see are for the most part masks, when they are not blanks.

Is it a face, do you think, that you look at, when Old Velvetpaws shakes you cordially by the hand, and congratulates you on your success in obtaining that appointment which he has been straining every nerve to secure for his youngest son—as yet found eligible for nothing? Old Velvetpaws has the biggest and brightest black eyes in the world—a pair of lips that seem to travel up to the very roots of his hair, so mobile, so expressive, so rich in play of line and facility of muscle as they are, and a smile that affects even the tips of his ears, it is so general and so expansive—he shows a row of small, white, even teeth when he laughs, and he laughs long, loud, and often—but, bless your heart! Velvetpaws, though looking all face, never showed his true physiognomy to living man since he was a youngster at school, and got a caning for telling the master he was a muf. That was a lesson on the value of not saying all he thought which Velvetpaws never forgot; and from that day he began the manufacture of the mask which, with him, does duty for a human face. For what you see is only a bit of gutta percha, say, moulded into the likeness of a jolly, cheery-natured man full of the milk of human kindness with a grand heading of cream, and whose heart is an engine working by centrifugal force—flying outwards in general love for the whole family of man. Velvetpaws wears for his mask unselfishness and universal love: love so universal, and unselfishness so entire, that he can even congratulate a successful rival who has carried it over his son, while fingering a handful of that same son's I O Us in his pocket, which he himself will have to pay if Whitecross-street is to be shunned. But the real face underneath wears as its signs the pallid cheek of disappointment, the swollen brow of anger, the fiery eyes of hate, and the lifted lip of envy; and when he says, "My dear boy, I am so very glad of your success! so deucedly well deserved!" as he presses your hand with quite paternal cordiality, adding, "Come and take your chop with us to-morrow; my wife and the girls will be enchanted to see you," he has simply drawn on a mask, and is speaking through the metal mouthpiece.

If you accept his invitation and go to the

Humble Retreat, as it pleases him to call the most luxurious, cozy, elegant, and perfectly appointed mansion of small dimensions to be found in all Brompton, you will find more masks and one blank. Mrs. Velvetpaws and the elder two Miss Velvetpaws will wear the masks—the one cut into the likeness of a soft, maternal, purring tabby, the other of two joyous, frisking, not to say infantile, kittens; but Miss Evelina Amanda will have a blank. Years ago—very many years ago, for the Misses Velvetpaws, though wearing their kittenish masks, are well on in the dreary vale of old maidenhood—you were unutterably sweet on Miss Evelina Amanda. You were then a raw youth from school, and Miss Evelina constituted herself your social mamma, and undertook to polish you up to the proper degree of brilliancy; and naturally you were grateful in the way of gratitude most affected by young men with budding whiskers, and thought Miss Evelina Amanda's raven tresses and coal-black eyes the loveliest things to be seen this side of Paradise. And you told her so—being a foolish young owl—and offered to make them your own when time and the income-tax allowed; eager to put a millstone round your neck and gyves upon your wrists, as are so many young owls in their first blinking flights through the dazzling world of womanly seduction. But papa and mamma, though not averse to substantial settlements, had a wholesome horror of vague prospects; and as your share in the world's inheritance at that time was nothing better than what could be got out of hope, youth, a clear brain, an honest heart, and cleanly fingers, they shook their heads—by no means harshly, but by no means falteringly—and Miss Evelina Amanda Velvetpaws was forbidden to your arms. Since then the wheel of fortune has turned up a few more spokes, and all with progressively thick coatings of fine red gold to your side. Steadily and surely you have risen step by step and round by round, till now, there is not a father in all your set, nor a mother, nor a daughter, who would not think the offer of your hand a piece of good luck worth praying for. And so old Velvetpaws invites you to the Humble Retreat, where you see Miss Evelina Amanda again. Where you see a blank rather, in the guise of a human face.

Time, which has been such a fairy godmother to you, has been a crabbed old witch to Evelina. The glossy tresses are still there, to be sure, and the coal-black eyes to match, but the grace, the aroma, the aureole of the past have gone, never to return! And you, being now a full-grown owl, with eyes as sharp as a hawk's, see for the first time the full pattern of the millstone you had once been so anxious to hang round your neck; and you, too, draw on a mask when you turn your face radiantly on old Velvetpaws and the maternal tabby purring softly by his side; for they think you are, mayhap, restored to them, while you are thanking them dumbly for the happy escape they formerly provided for you. Just so much of sentimental constancy have you had, that you would not

speak the decisive word to little Susan May up there at Bayswater, until you had seen Miss Evelina Amanda again. Old memories are very sweet, and young delusions very lovely, and you did not know what stirring of the heart might not be awakened at the sight of the old love, once more like a goddess in your eyes than a mortal woman who added up the washing-book and ate brown bread for her digestion. But all passed finally, and for the last time, when you met her there again; for even old memories and young delusions cannot survive the death which lies in the blank. Hope, love, youth, enthusiasm, the tenderness which softens, the passion which inflames—all, all have gone—washed out in the bitter waters of disappointment—rubbed away by the terrible attrition of the world. The heart of her is dried up and can never blossom afresh, though she offers you cambric flowers on wire stalks, and would fain have you believe them the daisies and wild-flowers of spring; and her soul has narrowed and narrowed in her hardening worship of Mammon, till no image but that of gold can find reflection there, for all that she flashes a bit of broken looking-glass before you, which she wants you to accept as the divine light illuminating her. Ah, poor creature! cambric flowers on wire stalks, and bits of broken looking-glasses flashing back the flare of a will-o'-the-wisp, are but poor substitutes for the blooming of the tender heart, and the light of the loving soul; and a blank—a dead hopeless wall of flesh with eyes like curtained windows, and lips which open into a dead fosse—is but a dreary make-believe for a living human face, changeful and faithful, rich, rapid, eager, and true, as the living human face should be!

The next day little Susan May up at Bayswater learnt, though she did not understand, the result of your visit to the Humble Retreat, and what effect four masks and a blank had wrought in your heart. But then little Susan is one of those rare blessed who have a face; and even when she tries to manufacture for herself a mask, can never get beyond a veil of gauze or thinner lace, which it does not require a double-acting bull's-eye to see through. And to this quality, not of universal possession, she owes the best husband that ever wife adored.

All the passions wear at times stout clay masks defying scrutiny; but the two most difficult to hide are love and anger. Hatred, jealousy, envy, malice, avarice, and even some others of thicker blood and moister palms, can creep behind their masks and double-knot the thongs. But love and anger are hard to constrain, and fight desperately against disguises. And even when every other feature has been pinched and pushed inside the mask, the eyes still rebel, and the living fire which flashes from them tears the whole of the flimsy pretence to tatters, or grinds the stony make-believe to powder. A host of mask-makers crowd round, attempting to overpower that turbulent Love struggling to get loose. On one side Prudence, on the other perhaps Honour—two giants in the world of motives—

hold his hands, while sitting on the mask of indifference and sharpening the gag of silence. They think they have him safe. Bound hand and foot, dumb-lipped and stony-eyed, he lies in sobbing captivity between them; and Prudence draws her mantle close round her, and Honour turns his diamond star full into the sunlight, and they whisper to each other congratulations on their victory, and dispose of the fate of the conquered thing between them. Just for a moment these pæans softly whispered across the body of Love masked, bound, and sobbing—just for a moment of rest and silence—then up with the cry, off with the mask, away with the bonds—free, unbound, eloquent, and confessed, stands Love; and Prudence and Honour go shivering and beaten into the waste beyond the garden. Love! Love! Love! who has ever bound him? whose mask has ever hidden the glowing splendour of his face? Prudence and Honour have sometimes overthrown him in his tenderest years; Jealousy has transformed him to the likeness of Hate; he has lain as if dead under the wounds of Coldness; Inconstancy has bound his mouth with shame; and Death has plucked the roses from his cheeks and the kisses from his lips; but not one of them all has ever yet been his victor when he has come to his full strength, and even Death has not dragged him to annihilation!

Very frail for the most part are the masks of love; a breath blows them away and a tear dissolves them into nothingness, they fall off at the faintest touch of a tender hand, and are transparent to all but the eyes of the beloved. But to him by some strange glamour of the fancy the flimsiest veil that can be worn becomes as impenetrable as a six-inch plank, and a hollow mask, loose and slipping aside at every turn, with the eyes of Love gleaming through like stars on a winter's night, is as firmly fixed as the eternal tomb—as desolate, as dark, and as empty. Many are the masks which maidenly shyness, and many those which womanly reserve, fashion for love. The most general pattern is that of indifference, which often gets itself accepted when it fain would be refused, and which sometimes puts its wearer to the embarrassment of unmasking of her own free will, if she would not be left for ever under her disguise. Then there is the mask of petulance which is a kind of baby anger; and the mask of jealousy which simulates every other passion under heaven; and the mask of coquetry which now is burning hot and now ashen cold, leaving the poor beholder in bewilderment as to which is the true complexion after all, and what the real reading of the erotic thermometer. But still and always, though every one else can see through the disguise, the Beloved is stone blind; and the mask, whatever it may be, holds good for the true face beneath.

Which do you see, a face or a mask, when your friend tells you he is glad to see you—oh! very glad indeed! smiling floridly and speaking heartily, when all the while wishing you at the bottom of the Red Sea? The thing you look

at has the semblance of a face; there are the eyes, nose, and mouth, the skin and the hair generally held integral to that part of the person; but for all truth of meaning, the face of your friend smiling floridly is a mere mask showing nothing. How many people indeed show their true faces in society? The warm hand press would often, if truthfully translated, mean a dagger-stab; the glancing eyes would shoot forth poisoned arrows; the radiant smile would be a crisped-up sneer; the cordial welcome a growl of forbidding. The mask of polite needs and conventional smoothness hides the most wonderful unlikeness in the face beneath. Yet if it were not so, we should be all at fighting distance from each other, taking aim with bullets, not sugar-comfits, at each other's heads. Depend upon it, the manufacture of passable masks is the secret work of almost every one's life; and not what shall be shown, but what can be concealed, the problem afflicting most souls. I grant the value of this masking under many conditions. All needless anger, all narrow spite, all silly prejudice, all enmity, malevolence, annoyance, and contempt, all the range of hostile feelings are always better for being tight-masked and impenetrably veiled; but I never have understood why the gentler emotions, and the joyous, should be concealed; and why we should not be allowed to live with open faces, when we have nothing but love and pleasure to show. We are so desperately afraid of "committing ourselves," as we call it, when we go about the world unmasked; and I should like to know what great harm there would be in this self-committal, and how it is that a mask which does not speak the truth should be so much more considered than a face which does. The enigmas which rule human society, without ever a key to unlock their hidden meaning, are manifold; but is there, honestly, one more puzzling than the regard attached to masks, and the disrepute into which faces have fallen?

What a mask the unhappy wife is forced for prudence and self-respect to wear over that poor tear-dewen face of hers! If she does not wear it, and if she lets the tears fall down in the sight of all, burning ploughshares will not be too hot for her feet to walk on, and she must carry live coals from the world's altar, though they scorch her trembling fingers to the bone. Full of sympathy as the world is for her sorrows if only delicately indicated—lifting a mere corner of the veil daintily—it has neither sympathy nor respect if broadly shown, and rung into its ears through a six-foot speaking-trumpet. The mask of the ill-mated spouse, male or female, must be of peculiar manufacture and most careful manipulation; the kind more usually adopted, because most generally approved of, being one embodying a gentle patience—a plaintive manner of martyrdom—Saint Cecilia exhaling her soul in mournful music—Saint Sebastian lying speechless under the cruel arrows piercing his heart. By no means a sturdy denial of pain, but the confession of it

made with sweetness and submission, and a mask that says, "I do not complain," while showing you the whole facts of the case in a hand-glass. This is a wonderfully effective manner of masking conjugal distress, and I recommend it to the notice of all who wish to be canonised before death, for social saintship undeniable by the most envious. Those who wear no masks, and tell out their griefs in good round English without mouthpieces, will meet with no pity however great their sufferings, but will at once enlist the world against them, and be for ever irremediably in the wrong. This is one of the cases in which society demands a mask. However flimsy, however transparent, it must be worn; the more gracefully the better for the wearer—but gracefully or clumsily—still worn.

Poverty, too, is another condition that thinks itself obliged to mask as closely as any fine lady of olden times. I do not know why that should be, but it is so; and "keeping up appearances" is the first commandment of social religion. This is all very well, if people are content to mask their poverty in what may pass as decent sufficiency, no more: I can understand the pride which demands that as its right; but when they take to spangled veils, and plaster casts painted to look like marble, then I think them contemptible enough; and for my own part would prefer to show my true face with all its pinched distress, rather than this hollow make-believe which puffs out its cheeks with wind to look like the fat of food. That mask worn over the face of poverty is a terrible burden to the wasted muscles it constrains. Think how we have to smile and smile, and utter sweet platitudes sweet only to a free heart, but more bitter than gall and wormwood to the oppressed, and take an interest in small midge-bites—expressing the deepest sympathy for that last disastrous pinprick which actually went through the skin, when all the while a monstrous Anaconda is twining its folds closer and closer round us, and the deadly asp of ruin is stinging nearer to the heart of us, and our final destruction is every day more inevitable. That bill which must be met to-morrow—gracious powers! and not a penny to meet it with, and the holder himself a poor man, or an inexorable—that man in possession left smoking, and drinking good beer in the kitchen, with Molly the cook fraternising dangerously on the matter of the best cut of beef—that writ so sure to be out—the bill of sale so sure to be enforced—with these coils of the Anaconda crushing in our ribs, we go to my Lady Littlecare's, and condole with her on the death of her canary, or echo her indignant disappointment about the dear duchess's ball—the grand ball of the season—where she had set her heart on being present, but was prevented by my Lord Littlecare's whimsy for the gout and her society that evening. Or, without a week's provision in your pocket, your friend in the country writes up to you to spend some twenty or thirty pounds for him in a knick-knack, which he will repay you by cheque when he knows the exact

amount. I know the embarrassment and mortification of that as well as most, and have been put to unheard-of straits and shame either by having to spend my last sixpence on my friend's whim, or being obliged to confess that I had not as many shillings as I was required to advance pounds. Or young Presto, the popular author, invites you to a champagne supper to celebrate the success of his new novel, which—perhaps it is mere bile and disappointment that makes you say, is mere trash—trash, sir, and waste paper, compared to that grand epic of your own, rejected now by every publisher in London; but on the acceptance of which you had cast your best bower anchor, and are now drifting away hopelessly into the great ocean of despair and destitution. Or, being a woman and a mother, and oppressed with the sad lack of your pretty Julia at home, wanting even essentials, and unable to take her pleasure with her friends on account of that lack, you have to listen to Miss Lustre's complaints of her milliner, the horrid creature! who has trimmed her new velvet with a lace just half an inch too narrow, and who is thenceforth and for ever excluded from all benefit in the Christian dispensation. Your pretty Julia in her worn boots and faded cottons would have been made rich with the cost of just that trimming of despised lace; but you smother all this, and pulling on your mask gallantly, sigh and condole in full accord; and with the pressure of absolute need at home, agree with Miss Lustre that Valenciennes half an inch too narrow is an infliction intolerable to human nature, and that a milliner who could be guilty of such a misdemeanor is a serpent, and by no means to be patronised by sympathetic friends. I take it that Miss Lustre would not much admire the face, could she see it for a moment from behind the mask! Ah, my dear rich relations! how little you know of the true face of poverty! how wonderfully blind to all its masks save that odious one of pretence! But this, which the framers and wearers always think impenetrable, never yet deceived more than the merest tyro, and is sure to be discerned for what it is—the most pitiful make-believe in the whole mask manufactory!

But masks are more endurable than blanks. A mask at least presupposes life and activity, and if substitution is still substitution of something for something, a blank is a mere negative meaning nothing, if it be not death. A long course of worldliness creates a blank where was once a face; the slight misfortune of being born without a heart, or with too much water in the blood, or with brains but poorly folded, also trowels out blanks where faces should have been; selfishness makes a dead blank with an ugly crusting of the plaster; so, often, does a severe disappointment; but the deadening hardening worship of Mammon, fashionable exceedingly in our time, makes the blankest blank of all! I know nothing more sad than to meet one, after long years of absence, whose sweet, frank, loving face, where every feeling spoke its honest and intelligible word, and every heart-

beat had its mirror, had once been very near, and perhaps all too dear to our heart, and to find now only a stony blank where had been so precious and eloquent a face. It is a death in life—a spiritual murder—worse than any actual death of the physical powers; and for my own part I would rather the beloved had died than have lived down into such degradation of beauty. Bad enough is it to meet this blank if only as regards ourselves—leaving still the fact of the face for others; to touch cold clay in place of the living flesh which had once throbbed and reddened beneath our hand—to look into glass balls deftly coloured, instead of the loving eyes that used to mirror back our own, and flash glory and happiness, and the light of hope, and the warmth of love into our life—to turn hopelessly towards the dear land in which had lain our Eden, and to see, instead of the roses and palm-groves of former years, nothing but a high-walled city, peopled by strange feet, and closed against us for ever. This is more bitter than death.

WHAT IS THE GOOD OF FREEMASONRY?

EXTOLLED as the true faith; denounced as an offshoot of Satan; praised by crowned, and banned by tonsured heads; dreaded as a subtle political engine, and admired for its profound indifference to politics; the essence of goodness according to some men, and the spirit of evil if you listen to others; freemasonry is as complete a mystery to the uninitiated as when the mythical lady hid herself in the lodge clock-case, or the equally mythical American citizen was slain for tampering with its secrets. Listen to the words of wisdom, according to Brother Stodgers, P.M., and you will learn that men may be Freemasons for years without penetrating the arcana of the order; may attain divers dignities without comprehending their true import; may die in the fulness of masonic parts without having emerged from masonic babyhood; and after having spent as much time and labour on the art as would, to put it modestly, suffice for the acquisition of every European tongue, yet fall short of the supreme distinction of being “a good mason.” Whether, as the elder Mr. Weller, and the charity-boy he quotes, respectively remarked of the institutions of holy matrimony, and of getting to the end of the alphabet, it be worth while going through so much to learn so little, is, I hear the cynic whisper, entirely a matter of opinion; but that neither the labour involved nor its reward is under-estimated, the most superficial knowledge with the subject proves.

Brother Steele and myself have some right to our opinion, for we are past-masters, mark-masters, and royal arch companions—are officers of our chapters, and treasurers of our lodge. What our mutual and horsey friend Tibbins irreverently calls our “plated harness,” involves medals, jewels, and ornate ribbons for our manly

breasts, aprons for our fronts, and broad collars like those worn by knights of the Garter (but handsomer) for our necks. The Victoria Cross is an ugly excrescence compared to the costly decoration given me as a testimonial by the brethren of my mother lodge; the clasps to the jewels of some of our friends exceed in number those of the oldest Peninsular veteran, and we calculate that we might now be Sanskrit scholars of some eminence had we thought fit to serve that language as faithfully as we have served the craft. Upon sordid money considerations we scorn to dwell. Initiation fees, exaltation fees, fees for advancement, emergencies, subscriptions to charities, to lodges, and for special purposes, make up a pretty sum to look back upon; and if the upshot of it all were but the amusement and gratification derived, I am not prepared to say that we have had full value for our money. Joyous evenings, periodical feasts (in which something else flows besides soul), mutual compliments, and pleasant friendships, may all spring from other sources than what Burns called “the mystic tie.” With the warmest appreciation of the pleasures of freemasonry, I, for one, should renounce the whole paraphernalia of colours, aprons, and gewgaws, were I not satisfied of their practical value, and deeply impressed with their usefulness in stimulating to benevolent impulses and charitable deeds. This is, in truth, the chief virtue I care to claim for the order, in this country and in these times. Abroad, the Freemasons, so fiercely cursed by his Holiness the Pope, may mix up democratic caballing with their ceremonials, and play an important part in the spread of liberal principles, but in England, religious and political discussion are alike forbidden in lodge; and though in the olden days, when skilled craftsmen worked together in travelling bands, leaving magnificent monuments of civilisation and piety in their train, the objects of association were better understood, they were not more practical in their results than now. It is impossible to belong to a masonic lodge, or even to eat masonic dinners with regularity, without helping to support some of the most noble charities in the land. You are caught, we will say, by the promise of festivity and the hope of enjoyment. You know a jovial set, and would like to be one of them, and you are in due course proposed, elected, and initiated in some masonic body. From that moment you are a cog in a mighty wheel, and can no more help moving with the rest of the machinery in the direction of good works, than you can avoid wearing your apron when on duty in your lodge. Your earliest lesson is that of charity and toleration; but the great advantage of the rules of the community you have entered, is, that no individual demerits or torpor can long withstand their beneficial tendency. Other precepts you may neglect or ignore. Your private life may be far from irreproachable. You may be depreciated by your fellow-members as “a knife-and-fork mason”—that is, one who cares more for the table of the tavern than the table of the law—and may be

quoted by outsiders in proof of the evil effect of belonging to a secret society. All this rests with yourself. Even what we call the inner mysteries of our order—mysteries which it takes so much time and application to master and comprehend—do not pretend to alter character. A selfish man will be a selfish mason, a churlish man a churlish mason, a conscientious man a conscientious mason, to the end of time. It is wiser to disclaim all legerdemain, and freely confess that no purifying or awakening talisman is given to the masonic neophyte. The knowledge imparted is moderate in extent, and the man obtaining it finds that he has but learnt the rudiments of an elaborate system, the true bearing of which is veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols. Those who sneer at masonic symbols, who ask with conventional irony why masons cannot accomplish the good they profess to seek without donning aprons and bedecking themselves with glittering baubles, should, to be consistent, denounce symbolism altogether. Take the House of Commons, and note the precise formality with which old rites and customs are observed there, and say whether the solemn Speaker would look as wise and dignified in a shooting-jacket or a dressing-gown, and whether the quaintly wigged and gowned figures below him are not more appropriately attired than if they wore the paletot and wide-awake of country life. Regard the throne with its surroundings of velvet and ermine and jewels and gold; the pulpit with its conventional black and white; the bench with its time-honoured robes; the bar with its wigs and gowns; or, turning to private life, remark how the symbolism of dress and ornament attends us from the cradle to the grave. The white draperies of the christening ceremony, the orange-flowers and favours of the wedding, the ghastly mockery of the nodding black feathers on the hearse, are surely as open to criticism as our masonic blue and white aprons, or the gay ornaments. Freemasons, let it be remembered, rarely obtrude their finery on the outer world. There are other excellent societies, the members of which periodically break out in buff boots and green tunics, or march with linked fingers through the town, to the clashing of wind instruments, and behind banners bearing copy-book axioms of approved morality. But with Freemasons it is a point of honour not to wear the costume of their craft, or any adornment pertaining to it, save in their own lodges. To do otherwise—to flaunt collar, apron, or jewel in other places—is a serious masonic offence, and one censured with severity by the authorities. The sole exception to this rule is some important public occasion, when a dispensation is granted by the grand master of the order, and the first stone of some great building is laid, or the remains of some distinguished brother is committed to the earth. The exceptional character of these occurrences entitles us to the boast that our symbols are only worn for the benefit of those who understand them, and to whose technical knowledge they appeal. In some cases, they mark

the rank of the wearer, like the soldier's uniform; in others, the practical good he has effected, like—shall we say, the bishop's mitre?

Each division of the order, called a lodge, is ruled over by certain officers, who are appointed by its master. To be eligible for this high post, you must have served in one of two subordinate offices for twelve months, and must be sufficiently skilled in what is called the "working," to conduct the elaborate rites creditably. The first condition is imperative; the second is sometimes evaded, though neither the master accepting office, nor the lodge electing him, acts up to the bounden obligation when this is the case. The cost of freemasonry depends almost entirely upon the lodge you join, and is governed by the habits of the brethren composing it, and the by-laws they have themselves agreed on. The broad rules controlling all lodges, and all Masons owing allegiance to the Grand Lodge of England, are things apart from these by-laws, though the latter have to be formally sanctioned as containing nothing opposed to the book of constitutions or the leading principles of the craft.

Each lodge meets several times a year, and in London the members usually dine or sup together at the conclusion of their "work." The master, the past-masters, and the two wardens, are all members of the masonic parliament; in this way every Freemason has directly or indirectly a voice in the government of the order. Each past-master has been master of a lodge for twelve months, and both master and wardens are elected by their fellows. The masonic parliament meets four times a year, and is called Grand Lodge. Its debates are held in the really magnificent temple in Great Queen-street, London, which has just been rebuilt under the auspices of the grand superintendent of works, Brother Frederick Cockerell, and is the property of the craft. It is presided over by a grand master, who is nominally elected every year, but who is eligible for re-election, and who is, as some Masons think unwisely, virtually appointed for life. Once in every year, some one is proposed and seconded as a fit and proper person to fill the position of grand master, and the votes of those assembled in Grand Lodge are taken. The present grand master of English Freemasons, the Earl of Zetland, who succeeded the late Duke of Sussex, is so widely and deservedly popular, that he has held this position for more than twenty years. The propriety of limiting the grand master's eligibility for office, and electing him for four or six years and no longer, is a point upon which there is considerable difference of opinion, and one which it is unnecessary to do more than allude to here. The grand master is aided by a council, and supported by grand officers, who may be termed the upper house of the masonic parliament. These dignitaries are appointed by the grand master, hold office for a year, have past rank, and wear distinguishing insignia for life. All questions of masonic law—and problems affecting these are of constant occurrence—all difficulties of administration, all disputes and dissensions—and, despite their

brotherly love, even Masons occasionally quarrel—can be brought before Grand Lodge as the final authority. Committees of its members sit regularly to adjudicate and present periodical reports, advise on the bestowal of money-gifts to necessitous brethren, and on the answers to be given to those asking for interference or advice. The time devoted to the subject, by those who take a leading part in these councils; the patient unwearied attention given to minute and frequently tedious details; the constant sacrifice of private interests to the common good; and the careful and laborious discussion which precedes every decision—all this would astonish those who regard freemasonry as a mere plea for conviviality. It is a simple fact that busy professional men habitually devote a considerable portion of their time to business drudgery; that boards and committees meet to debate and divide; that in no case is remuneration or reward looked for. This voluntary self-absorption is not the least striking part of freemasonry, for, at the meetings I speak of, neither convivial pleasures nor indirect personal advantage can be hoped for. It is sheer dogged hard work, performed gratuitously and cheerfully by men upon whom the rules and precepts I have hinted at, have made full impression. Let it be borne in mind that ten thousand initiations took place last year; that the income of the craft exceeds that of many a principality; that its members subscribe to their three charitable institutions—the Freemasons' Girls' School, the Freemasons' Boys' School, and the Asylum for Aged Freemasons and their Widows, some twenty thousand pounds annually; that the cares of administration and distribution devolve upon the busy men forming the committees and sub-committees named; and it will be readily seen that, apart from its "secrets," this time-honoured institution has worked, and is working, substantial and undeniable good. Its hold on earnest members is the best proof I can advance of the reality of its tie.

But it is time you saw one of the institutions we are so proud of. Let us take a railway ticket from either Waterloo or Victoria station, and after a twenty minutes' run alight at Clapham junction. A few minutes' bewilderment in the dreary subterranean caverns of that mighty maze; a few abortive ascents up steps which are so ingeniously placed at the sides of the tubular dungeon we traverse as to lure us upon wrong platforms, whence we are sent below again ignominiously; a short game at question and answer with the old crone selling oranges at the corner; and, crossing another railway bridge, we are in front of a spacious red brick building, on the lofty tower of which, besides the clock, are a pair of compasses and a blazing sun. We will not stop to talk further about symbols now. After admiring the spacious well-kept garden of this place, and enjoying the sweet scents rising up from every flower-bed, we make for the front door, when the sharp click of a croquet-mallet reaches us from the right, and, turning a corner, we come

upon a thoroughly happy party. Some twenty girls, from twelve to fifteen years old, are laughing merrily at the vigour with which one of their number has just sent the ball rattling through the little croquet hoops. The healthy, happy, laughing group framed in by foliage, and relieved by the bright green of the velvety turf upon which they play; the frankly modest confidence with which we, as strangers, are received; the courteous offer to accompany us round the grounds and the house; the revelation that, as this is the matron's birthday, every one is making merry in her honour—are all a capital commentary upon the masonic virtues I have vaunted. Next, we learn that some ladies and gentlemen are playing in another portion of the grounds, and in a few paces we are in their midst, being welcomed by house-committeemen, are hearing that our chance visit has happened on a red-letter day, and that other brethren are expected down. The speaker is an exalted Mason who has five capital letters after his name, and, as I have never seen him out of masonic costume before, it does not seem quite natural that he should play croquet without his apron and decorations. This gentleman (who will, I am sure, accept this kindly-meant remembrance in the spirit dictating it) is so pleasantly paternal, his exuberant playfulness and affectionate interest in the games played, and in the pretty little players, is so prominent, that we soon forget his grander attributes, and settle down to a quiet chat on the discipline and rules of the establishment. This is the Freemasons' Girls' School. It clothes, educates, and thoroughly provides for, one hundred and three girls, who must be daughters of Freemasons, between eight and sixteen years of age, and who are elected by the votes of its subscribers. The comfort of its internal arrangements, its spotless cleanliness, the healthiness of its site, the judicious training and considerate kindness of its matron and governesses, are themes we descant upon at length; the rosy faces and unrestrained laughter of the children bearing forcible testimony to us. The committee of management visit this school frequently and regularly, and their deliberations generally terminate in a romp with the school-girls. The little gardens, some with paper notices pinned to the shrubs, with: "Please do not come too near, as we have sown seed near the border—Signed 28 and 22," written in pencil in a girlish hand; the healthy cleanly dormitories, the light and airy glass-covered exercise-hall, where the young people drill and dance; the matron's private sanctum, which is like a fancy fair to-day in the extent and variety of the gay birthday presents laid out; the tea-room, where we all have jam in honour of the matron's nativity; the board-room, hung with the portraits of grand masters and masonic benefactors, and which is placed at our disposal that we may enjoy a quiet chat with the two dear little girls in whom we have a special interest, are all visited in turn. Then a procession is formed, and "We love Miss Smoothetwig dearly, and so say all of us!" is

sung, while Brother Buss, P.M. and P.Z., who has just come in, and Brother Putt, G.A.D.C., his fellow house-committeeman who has already welcomed us, beat time joyously to the good old "jolly good fellow" tune. This song is a little surprise prepared every year for the birthdays of governess and matron, and the amiable assumption of delight at an unexpected novelty which beams from the latter's kindly face when the well-worn tune is sung, is not the least pleasing incident of the day.

The Freemasons' Boys' School is at Woodlane, Tottenham, and in it from eighty to a hundred sons of Freemasons are clothed, educated, and provided for, with similar comfort and completeness. The institution for the relief of aged Freemasons and their widows, though neither so wealthy nor so liberal as the other two, provides an asylum for, and grants annuities to, the old and infirm.

These are some of the secrets of freemasonry. The coffins in which, as many of my friends firmly believe, we immature young and tender candidates; the painful brandings which make sitting down impossible; the raw heads, red-hot pokers, and gory bones, with which we heighten the awesomeness of our dreadful oaths; the wild revels and orgies which some ladies believe in,—must be left in obscurity. Having shown the fair fruits of masonry, I must leave you to form your unaided judgment of the tree which brings them forth. Besides, I dare not reveal more. The learned author of many volumes of masonic lore has stated his firm conviction that Adam was a Freemason, and that the order, and its accompanying blessings, extend to other worlds than this. I offer no opinion on any such highly imaginative hypothesis, but confine myself to the stout assertion that Freemasons have a tie which is unknown to the outer world, and that their institution is carefully adapted to the needs, hopes, fears, weaknesses, and aspirations, of human nature. That it has unworthy members is no more an argument against the order, than the bitter sectarianism of the Rev. Pitt Howler, and the fierce uncharitableness of Mrs. Backbite, are arguments against Christianity.

THE SECOND MRS. TILLOTSON.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NEVER FORGOTTEN."

BOOK IV.

CHAPTER XIII. SUSPICION.

SOME of the bank shareholders were in such good humour with their large dividends, and especially with the successful introduction of "the great Lackson" into their society, that they anxiously cast about for some way of exhibiting their overflowing gratitude, and proposed presenting a gorgeous silver testimonial to the chairman. This "graceful act," as the papers called it, was enthusiastically carried out. A plateau, candelabra, and *et ceteras*, of massive silver, and into which had been ingeniously

worked all sorts of banking emblems, was very soon constructed by Messrs. Tilbury, the eminent silversmiths, and was ready for presentation. The shareholders particularly admired the little miniature cash-shovel, beautifully bound with gold instead of brass, and the pile of imitative coin and notes which was at the base. As one of the shareholders said with justice, "You could see the very Queen's head on the half-crown."

This was presented to Mr. Tillotson at his own residence by a deputation of shareholders, who made speeches, in which it was said very often, "You, sir, having stood by the cradle of the company; and you, sir, having nursed its tender years and seen it through many shocks; you, sir, had now the proud satisfaction of standing by and seeing it arrive at all the strength of a lusty manhood." Mr. Tillotson listened with true modesty and secret astonishment to this description of his services, and acknowledged the receipt of this sumptuous present "in a suitable manner." The deputation was then entertained at an "elegant repast," when there were more healths and more speeches.

This suggested to Mr. Tillotson that it was time for him to entertain some of his brother directors magnificently. This, too, was strongly pressed on him by the secretary, who said, truly, that these things were all advertisements, and better than advertisements. He was growing interested in the bank, too, himself, and though there was that little shadow at home, still on the whole he was very happy, and thanked God every morning for being privileged to enjoy so much undeserved happiness. Everything would, no doubt, come right; and he had such sweetness and patience, and was ready to lay everything to the account of his own defects or fault, that he had very soon argued himself into something like calm and acceptance of everything that came.

"This is to be *your* feast, Mrs. Tillotson," he said to his wife. "Who will you ask? We must have our friend Ross, who is behaving so well, and our dear captain and his niece; but she will not come; and 'the great Lackson,' as they call him, and the Tilneys; and I have asked, without consulting you, Mr. and Mrs. Bunnett, great City people, and *our* people, too—they will amuse you—and Mr. Nelgrove, another City man, and one or two more I should like to ask. I begin to take interest in these things. Six months ago the idea of my giving a dinner would have been the most comical thing in the world."

"You are so kind—so good," she said; "more good to me than I deserve."

Yet, when she was alone, she began thinking with a sort of dread of Ross, and how he would behave before company, and how, if he should arrive in a humour of disappointment, what a scene he might bring about. But presently came a note from him in this pleasant strain:

"Dear Tillotson. I shall be glad to feast

with you if you give us a good dinner, which of course you will. It will be, of course, a treat for a poor fellow like me to see all your state and glory. Give my respects to the charming Mrs. Tillotson.

"Yours,
"W. Ross."

She had hoped he would *not* come. Even in this note she saw a secret earnest of some outburst. It was indeed certain that the lights, the flowers, the gold and silver, and all the choice evidences of their prosperity, would only inflame him; and she could not bear to think that that kind, good, gentle heart who worshipped her should receive the least mortification in public above all.

She came to him again. "I want some one else asked to our party," she said; and the devout face was put close to his.

A delighted smile came into his face. "Now this is what I like," he said; "fill the table; don't ask me about it. Who is your friend, if you will tell me—a female confidential friend?"

She hesitated a moment. "It is Mr. Grainger," she said. "I am afraid that, unless he is there, Ross may——"

The delight fled from his face in a moment. "What does this mean?" Suddenly he checked himself, and said, coldly, "To be sure; ask whom you please—any one you like. Grainger, by all means."

It flashed on her then for the first time what was in his mind. "Dear husband," she said (and what always seemed to him the "divine look of earnestness" came into her face), "surely you know what we spoke of so lately, and that we agreed upon that one course. This Grainger can be useful to us. I know how much I owe to you, dearest, for all your deep love and true and faithful affection, which, as I stand here and speak, I would die to find some way of requiting."

Into Mr. Tillotson's pale face came back the old enthusiasm. "You are an angel," he said; "above my wretched earthy nature by a million of degrees. I feel ashamed at this moment. Yes, we shall have this Grainger, Ross's friend, and make him welcome. I am the old stupid short-sighted being I always was, and always shall be!"

The letter was sent, and Grainger wrote to say he would come. Still a weight hung upon Mr. Tillotson, and which he could not put away from him, although he was one of those men who tried to reason, and sometimes successfully, with their feelings and prejudices. In this mood he went, one afternoon, after his banking was done, to see his friend the captain, whose life had been flowing on pleasantly in his old occupations, busy with his tools, the lamp, and furniture repairs. He found him in the flowered dressing-gown and spectacles, busy with his favourite work, honing his "rayshors"—giving them a sweet edge—an operation he was always delighted

to perform for a friend, and performed with surprising skill.

"My dear Tillotson," he said, "delighted at this visit. Sit down and let me see you. You find me all in a mess here. Tom must always have something to fiddle with, like a sixty-year-old child. And how is she, that elegant creature your wife? You may be proud of her. I declare, last Sunday, I never saw a finer woman in my life. Never."

Mr. Tillotson looked at him with a sad interest. "None of our poor tongues could do justice to her. She is miles above us—and—above me; and that—that thought, my dear captain, is making me wretched."

"My goodness!" said the captain, stopping his stropping in wonder. "Ah! Folly, my dear boy."

Mr. Tillotson shook his head sadly. "No folly; none in the world. She is superior to us all, and must know it. What business had I to think of her, or one like her? Beings like her must have something they can love, and that can return their love. Not an old worn, beaten heart like mine. I do not blame her; but I ought to have known it myself. It was cruel to her."

The captain's jaw fell. "Eh?" he said. Then it all came upon him, and with that grave voice and good sense which was common to him, he laid his hand on his friend's sleeve. "My dear fellow, now don't. This is all hippishness, neither more nor less. You've got as fine a woman as a man could wish for—a woman that loves you, as I know. After a time you can't expect them, the creatures, to be all showing it every hour in the day, with affection and kisses, and that sort of thing. It's out of reason and nature. They have the house, and the dinners, and the cooks, and a hundred things to look after; and if she had a little liking for her old playfellow that she was brought up with, sure, Tillotson, don't we all do much the same, and have gone after fifty different girls, one with another, without minding what became of the last? Why, if she hadn't a little touch for her old flame, she wouldn't be the fine creature she is. Just think of that, my boy. Why, I declare," he added, with the deepest sympathy, "when I think of all they have to go *through*, the creatures, and with bringing children into the world, and nursing them through, and bringing them up, why, they make strong men ashamed of themselves."

Mr. Tillotson was struck with this earnestness. "My dear captain," he said, "you are right. I behave like a child at times, and feel like a child. I have been very happy; too much so for one like me; and yet, I don't know how, a weight has come on me latterly, and a sense of presentiment that something is impending—that some of that old misery will turn up, and that all will be snatched from me, and that I have no business to be so blessed as I am. It is absurd, but I cannot shut it out."

"Ah, my dear fellow, megrims every one of

them. I used to have them, getting up in the morning after the mess, I declare to goodness, ready to cut my throat from the Lows. But it went off after a chop, or, if *that* failed, a nip of good old cognac."

CHAPTER XIV. THE FIRST DINNER.

THE day at last arrived—Monday. The grave menials of state who "attended" in the City, at Mansion House and Guildhall, were in waiting. They smiled, those portly men, at this little effort, as compared with the gigantic festivals they were accustomed to. Their chubby fingers were used to the handling of solid wrought gold and silver. The glories of the Egyptian Hall were what they were accustomed to, and therefore, when Mr. Bowler characterised Mr. Tillotson's party as "a little effort," he might be reasonably pardoned. These gentlemen rather looked down on the West-end waiters, who in their turn despised the coarse unadorned sumptuousness of their City brethren.

Mr. Tillotson was kept at his bank a little later than usual. Mrs. Tillotson at first, from the mere novelty, took some little interest in what was going on. But, after a time, Mr. Bowler, who had come early to have "a general hi to the 'ole," which consisted in languidly laying his head on one side, and taking slant views along the table, hinted that any assistance of the sort, however well meant, only disturbed his imagination. Then she went up to her organ, and the rich melody came floating down to the hall on Mr. Bowler's ears, who said, en passant, that it was "fair, fair and ladylike."

As she played on, some one came and called, and an assistant told her that there was a gentleman below that wished to see Mr. Tillotson "particular and important." This sort of importunity always gave her a shock and chill, for it was associated with messages from Mr. Grainger.

She sent down word as to the time when Mr. Tillotson would be in. Then came a reply to know if she was sure; for the matter was "very particular."

After this she sat at her harmonium thoughtfully, smoothing the golden hair, and not playing. So the day went by until five o'clock drew near, when she wondered that Mr. Tillotson had not returned.

Suddenly she was roused by the tall gaunt figure of Martha Malcolm standing before her. "The gentleman that was here before was below."

Mrs. Tillotson desired her to tell him that Mr. Tillotson had not come home yet.

Martha stood there gauntly. "He was told that," she said, "and hasn't gone."

Her mistress then said that she must tell some of the men to see him.

"He is in the study, sitting down," said Martha, in the same tone, "and he said your husband would know in good time the rights of his coming and going. I only repeat what *he* said."

Again Mrs. Tillotson felt the chill and dread she had felt before, and did not answer. Martha went down. After a few minutes' pause her mistress rose and went down also, slowly.

In the study, sitting in her husband's chair, was a short, red-cheeked man, rather shabbily dressed, stout, and dissipated-looking, with weak eyes, and two red rings under them. He only half rose as she entered. "Well, what message do you bring me? No more hunting me about from post to pillar. I've had too much and more of that. Oh! are you Mrs. Tillotson? Beg pardon. But my eyes are not of the best."

She stood before him, almost haughtily. "What do you want?" she said. "We are busy to-day. My husband will not be in for some time. Could you come in the morning?"

"No, I can't," he answered, bluntly. "Nothing of the sort. All that sort of business is gone and over now. It did very well till lately; but we have done with it. I have suffered enough. But everybody gets their innings at last, madam."

"I don't understand you," she said, "or to what you allude. I must really ask you to go. If you have any business—"

"And you don't know or guess? Really now, would you have me believe that? *You*, wife of his bosom, bone of the bone, and all that. Shove me out, the day you are giving a dinner, with the smell of the stews coming up. Call the police, perhaps. I shouldn't be surprised if that was the next step. Then," he added, with great deliberation, "I should really wish to see *that* attempted, just for curiosity, eh? Come, my dear madam," said he, rising, "I want to see him; where is he? For I leave town, and I can tell you he wouldn't like to miss seeing me, a friend that he hasn't set eyes upon for fifteen years."

She was growing nervous. An undefined terror was filling her. "I don't understand; what *can* you want? Do go away, or he will be here presently."

The other fell back laughing. "Ah, no more acting. You have done it well, so far. Of course he has told you about me—East-wood."

"Never," she said, eagerly. "I never heard your name. Go away, do, whatever you mean. You will only worry and annoy him, and he has enough on his mind. I can get you money; but go."

The other shook his head. "As for money, that will come by-and-by. Now, somehow, I believe you do know nothing," and he looked at her for a moment with a puzzled air, and half irresolute. Suddenly he stood up. "Well, after all, I believe I *am* an intruder here, and shall take myself off. There, that's behaving like a gentleman. Admit that. Fact is, no wonder you could know nothing, for there is nothing to know. And so you wish me to go?"

"Yes," she said, eagerly, "nothing so much. Please."

"He is attached to you, eh? Worships the ground you walk on? Has the carpet taken up and put by for a relic?"

"Yes, yes. But pray, pray go."

"Ah," said the other, taking his hat. "Shame for him if he wasn't fond of you. There, don't think of it any more. What would you say to his owing me a hundred and two pound ten for fifteen years, and never paying even a pound's interest—supposing *that* is what I want from him? And when I hear of dinners, and plate, and a bank, it's only natural a man should cut up rough at such treatment. I beg your pardon," he added, obsequiously. "I really do, for intruding. I can see him any time, so don't mention it to him, nor yet my name—Blackwood. Good-bye, Mrs. Tillotson; good-bye, and forgive me."

He went out, leaving her in a state of wonder and stupefaction. There was something half jest, half earnest, in the man's manner, which she could not understand. That sudden change, too, puzzled her. But she dismissed it all, and said to herself, wearily, "What do all these things mean?"

In half an hour Mr. Tillotson came home. She cleared her brow, and smoothed her hair, as she heard his step. Both faces went through the same process; both approached each other with weariness underneath, but with a cheerfulness that was put on. Both saw what was under each assumed cheerfulness, and went away to dress; for the hour was at hand.

A picket of the City gentlemen was in the hall when the company began to arrive. They at once stood to their arms. No need of asking names. Mr. Bowler knew well the figure of Mr. Bunnett, the famous "Ryder, Bunnet, and Ryder," whose plate he had removed deftly at a hundred feasts. So, too, with the form of "the great Lackson," before whom he all but grovelled. After all, should adversity overtake any one of us who are asked out to dinners, could there be a more agreeable retreat discovered, or line of life in which we can honestly make our bread, than the career of a waiter in good and choice practice? We should see the best of society, breathe the air of refined life, have a certain amusement in watching the manners and customs of those above us, and, what is a more costly delectation, enjoy as a sort of perquisite and without impeachment of dishonesty, some share of the rich meats and juices, the select wines, which are set forward for the entertainment of our betters. Why do not reduced gentlemen take to this pleasing occupation?

Mrs. Tillotson, soft and brilliant, yet with a little wistful and almost anxious look, stood in her drawing-room waiting for the guests. The golden hair glistened under the wax-lights: an air of wonderful sweetness hung about her. Was she a little nervous about this, her first party? which, as Mr. Bowler remarked with truth during the day, was a thing to lie on any "lady or gent's spirits, be they ever so high or so low. It always took 'im short," he said, "at

the Manshun 'Us until all was well through, and his 'ed was a laying on his bed."

The great Lackson, for a man so much at ease in finance, was anything but at home in social life. He called Mrs. Tillotson "marm," and seemed to be taking half a turn ahead or astern across the rug with such heavy motion both of speed and tongue, that one looked for the sound of splashing paddles. Mrs. Tillotson gave him gentle welcome, which only disarranged him more. Then came Ross and his friend—Ross more flushed and wild-eyed than usual, with cheek-bones more hot and projecting; but still with a ferocious handsomeness upon him. His friend Grainger was submissive, quiet, and respectful, as usual. But something more cheerful made its appearance in the shape of Mr. Bunnett and Mrs. Bunnett, of the City, who came in jovially, and appeared to have broken out all over into broad smiles. They came in arm in arm; clean, resplendent, and burnished all over. After them arrived Nelgrove, an ecclesiastical-looking City man; and the captain, who had declared some days before that it was high time for him "to treat himself to a dress-coat of the very tip-top fashion, just as he had treated himself to a "frock" on the occasion of the wedding, appeared in it, conscious, but shy.

In due time the company went down and sat at dinner. The gorgeous plateau and candelabra presented by the grateful shareholders glittered on the table. At first, Mr. Bowler and his following stood behind, awfully, like guards at a stage execution; but presently, after the solemn raising of the first cover, became galvanised into violent life and motion. The cheerful Bunnett, whose mouth distended between his collars like a gate between two white walls, chatted heartily, as he settled himself to enjoy the meal. The great Lackson was still ill at ease, and uncomfortable. Ross, who had taken down Miss Bunnett (Mrs. Bunnett was on his left), had a sneer as broad as Mr. Bunnett's gate on his face. His eyes were bright, and roamed over the table.

"Lovely, ain't it," said she to him—"the plattoe?"

"Exquisite," said Ross, looking at it. "That's what they gave him—superb. It makes one gasp. Don't you admire it? When will they give you or me anything of this sort? I don't say, when shall we deserve it."

Grainger had drifted up somehow next to Mrs. Tillotson. Under the soft lights in the shareholders' candelabra the golden hair was a feast to look on. Mrs. Lackson had been taken in by Mr. Tillotson. The captain was next to Mr. Nelgrove, who, however, made small account of him, being apparently a worshipper of Mr. Bunnett. Anything more slavish than this almost adoration of the City man could scarcely have been conceived; and it was accompanied with a pleasant badinage and rallying. Mr. Nelgrove spoke of his friend usually as "he."

"Mrs. Tillotson—I say, Mrs. Tillotson, he's a

poor man, and will end in the workhouse—of course. Were you ever down at Bulmer? It's uncommonly like a workhouse."

"Now, Nelgrove," said Mr. Bunnett, "you stop. I'll not ask you down to Bulmer again if you don't keep quiet. Bulmer's looking very well just now," he went on to Mrs. Tillotson. "I assure you I laid out seven hundred pounds on the gardens; and I am at this moment in treaty with Lord Drobbam's gardener. Not that I think he's a bit better gardener because he comes from a lord. That's rather against him."

The jackal again struck in. "Mrs. Tillotson, I should be very glad to see Bulmer once more, if I was let. I was only there once or twice; but now that we are getting my Lord Drobbam's gardeners, I suppose I shall have no chance. It's a very poor place—wretched. No peaches, ma'am, no nectarines—O no—no flowers, no grapes, no rhododendrons—quite a wilderness, ma'am. O yes."

Mr. Bunnett laughed heartily at this clever irony, and Mrs. Bunnett bade Mrs. Tillotson not to mind "that Nelgrove," who was always at his joke. Then the subject glided on to something else, and Mr. Nelgrove, turning to the captain, asked him if he had ever been down to Bulmer. "About the finest show-place in England."

The captain, who had been silent, only heard imperfectly. "Eh?" he said, full of smiles.

"Bulmer, Bulmer," said the other, in a loud tone; "every one in the kingdom knows it."

"O, to be sure," said the captain, seeing that his assent was required to something, "to be sure! Fine, indeed. What you may call the right sight."

"The peaches, sir," the other went on, in the same loud tone, "are not matched by the royal fruit. Bullock, the head gardener, won ever so many prizes."

"O yes," said the captain, with eager admiration and assent. "See that, now. Wonderful!"

"What became of Bullock?" said the jackal, across to his patron. "He went away, I know. Of course he wasn't good enough. I'd have thought a hothouse gardener at a hundred a year was pretty well; but that won't do, it seems, for millionnaires. No, no. My Lord Drobbam, it seems, now."

Mr. Bunnett deprecated this attack softly. "No, no; really no. The man took airs upon himself, and I had to part with him. I would have gone on with him, I assure you, if it hadn't been for that."

"Have you seen his picture?" Nelgrove went on, half to the table, half to the captain, "full length, in his liveryman's uniform? Nothing short of Sir Wilkins, R.A., believe me. Five hundred and fifty without the frame. You and I, poor devils, must put up with our cartes at seven and sixpence. I must say, though, a fine likeness."

"Yes," said Mr. Bunnett, modestly. "Sir Wilkins dined with me at one of our Hall dinners, and he said there publicly, after the dinner, that

he was putting out all his strength into it, and going to make it a fine body of colour."

Ross, who heard this speech, gave a laugh, and turned to Miss Bunnett. "That was after dinner, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she said, with pride. "He sat next papa."

"To be sure," said Ross. "Which of the two was most honoured? Art and wealth side by side. That's the style; that's the true alliance. Here, champagne here. Your father's a really great man, and a perfect *Mecenas*."

Mr. Tilney heard this remark, and addressed Mrs. Bunnett. "I like to see that mixing, ma'am. It's good for us all. I have heard, in my old court-days, ma'am, long ago, when I used to eat, drink, and, I may say, sleep with the royal family, and had the run of the house—I was, as of course you know," added Mr. Tilney, confidentially, "*in* the household—nothing could be nicer or more homely than the behaviour of the family; just like you or me, or that butler taking round the sherry now. That's what I like our aristocracy for."

Such of us as know a little of Mr. Tilney can conceive how he spoke to this good lady, and with what unction he enlarged on those old aristocratic days. Here Mr. Nelgrove, the jackal, began to allude as reluctantly to "the gallery" at Bulmer, with a "Do you know what *he* gives for a pair of statues? I tell him we'll see him in the poorhouse, and Bulmer will be put up to sale, and you or I will get them cheap. That's the way I arrange it, eh? Ha! ha! The worst is, I believe, he'll not be able to ruin himself soon enough. He tries hard, I know; but he'll break down in the attempt."

And Mr. Nelgrove laughed so uproariously at this ludicrously far-fetched idea, that his patron could not but smile. Ross was looking on with bitter contempt, and there was mischief in his eye. As usual, he poured out a stream of irony and banter on Miss Bunnett, who looked at him helplessly. "Do you hear that man?" he said. "Of course the person he is flapping accepts it all. You observe how refined and delicate his flattery is?"

"Flattery!" repeated the young lady, mystified, and all but frightened. "O, you mean flattery."

"Flattery or flattery," he said. "We ought to have one apiece. But I admire the gifts of Mr. Nelgrove. He is a regular artist, you see—has a fine eye for colour and effect." He went on, turning to Nelgrove: "Now, what's your view about our host Tillotson? Will he last long? Will you get anything at his auction?"

Mr. Nelgrove laughed. "Very good, sir; very good."

"I say, Tillotson," Ross called to him, "this gentleman is talking jocosely of *your* coming to the hammer. I dare say we shall see the testimonial put up, and knocked down to a friend of the family. These things are on the cards. Banks, you know, are uncommonly ticklish!"

He ended with a rude harsh laugh.

The soft eyes turned towards him hurriedly, and with an imploring look.

Mr. Grainger said, in a low voice; but which was distinctly heard, "Our friend Ross is in one of his malicious moods to-day. He is allowed to say what he likes here. He is a privileged person."

"Indeed he is," said Mr. Tillotson, good humouredly, "and he has a right to be; for we are actually plaintiff and defendant in a lawsuit. But we'll have some wine together, notwithstanding."

Ross's face darkened. "I don't jest about *that*," he said, slowly, "and don't mean to jest about it. I don't take any wine. They have put me on a regimen. Take it away, do you hear." (This was to Mr. Bowler, whose opinion, expressed later at a Manshun 'Us dinner, was, "that that party—refusing of his liquor as he did—was as ill-reggulated a man as ever he met.")

"Regimen!" said Mr. Grainger, in a low voice to Mrs. Tillotson, "he's been keeping a regimen, indeed. It's almost lucky—though you may not think so, Mrs. Tillotson—that I am here, for he is working himself up into one of his moods. Look how he glares at your husband! He thinks he has been insulted in some way. Everything, indeed, is an insult to him now. This magnificence, the wines, the pictures, at this moment, have been 'thrust in his face,' he would call it, to make him feel his own poverty. I wish I were beside him."

Piteous distress was in Mrs. Tillotson's face. She all but wrung her hands.

"I feel what you say to be true," she went on, "and every day I feel the want in myself of that power that can control others. I am wretchedly weak. Even this very afternoon some one came to our house—a wild, half-savage being—forced himself in, hunting for my husband. Why should this happen to us? Why should Ross—for it was one of *his* set, I know—expose us to this?"

A quick light came into Grainger's eyes. "What sort of man was this? Was he short, stout, with red rings round his eyes?"

She almost started. "Why, you know all things," she said.

"No, that was none of Ross's set. He was of your husband's set." His voice got lower. "But I have no right to speak to you of such things. I could have prevented his coming; but you would think, naturally, that I was officiously thrusting myself into all your concerns. I may say this much, that he is a dangerous man, and it grieves me to tell you that his presence here bodes your husband some trouble. I must warn you of this."

They were so earnest in their talk, and her eyes were turned to him with such eagerness, that neither of them noticed Mr. Tillotson—utterly abstracted from his neighbour's conversation—watching them with an expression of pain that was evident to all.

"Go on, tell me more," he said. "That is,

if you will so indulge me. I may be a little useful."

"No, I recollect now," she went on. "You must be wrong; for he suddenly changed and became quite deferential—that it was all a mistake, and that he only wanted a small debt that my husband owed him."

"And he changed in this way when you—? This is important."

"When I—let me think. O, let me recollect. Yes. When he found that I knew nothing of him, or that my husband had not told me anything of him."

"Ah, there it is," said Grainger, hastily. "I see through all these little ruses. I met that man abroad, and I know him by heart. I know the whole at this moment. There is some passage in your husband's life which he—"

"You are mistaken," she said, passionately. "You are fond of repeating that—"

"I do not know it, but I believe it. Think of that night at St. Alans, when he left your table. This man knows something of it—found that you were not in the secret, and will work upon your husband for ends of his own to keep it from you. That is the game; at least, so I read it."

The colour came to her cheeks. "I do not so accept it," she said. "Your theories are too ingenious, and built on too slight a foundation. This is some common man who is in want of money."

Grainger bent his head and smiled. "As you please. You won't understand me till it is too late. You will call me then, and I shall not come, perhaps. What if I tell you his name, which you do not know, Mrs. Tillotson?"

"Ah! *that would be a proof*," she said.

"Eastwood," he said, in a slow distinct voice, and with his eyes steadily fixed on her.

CHAPTER XV. THE DINNER (CONTINUED).

THERE were other eyes, which they had not noticed, bent forward, devouring them. There was a pale face watching this whispered conversation, where the heads were bent together, almost with agony. The heavy stout lady beside the host, though "making an excellent dinner," as she said herself afterwards, thought him almost "impolite, Bunnett," and "never so much as asked me if I had a mouth belonging to me."

Ross, too, from afar off, had been watching also with a bitter sneer on his mouth, restless, impatient, and not attending to his neighbour. He saw the worn, anxious look on Mr. Tillotson's face; and, with that ill humour of his which took any victim that offered, said, half aloud, "Look at our friend's face! Just look! Tillotson, I say, are you going to eat your guests with your dinner? Are you ill? Don't he look ill, now? I appeal to the ladies."

There was an unconcealed sneer and insolence in the way this was spoken. Mr. Tillotson coloured and recovered. "I am quite well," he said, coldly. "Why do you say I look ill?"

"Interest. Interest, of course," said Ross,

with a laugh. "Miss Bunnett, how do you like this house? The pictures and the finery show you what banking can do. Long live the City! I say. When I am altogether run out of means, I think I must take to the City, and come in time to have a place like your Bully Hall which that gentleman warms up so much about."

"Bulmer is our place," said the young lady, coldly.

"Well, Bulmer. I beg its pardon. I say, Tillotson, you should let out a little, and not hoard as you do. This young lady says you should give a ball, and not keep up a melancholy face, as if you were ordered for execution. When he comes to sit to Huish—isn't he the swell painter?—they will say you were trying to look like Byron."

Grainger struck in in his calm voice: "You see, our friend Ross takes bitter views. The world has rubbed him a little, Miss Bunnett. He has been disappointed, and he has had a bad opinion from his lawyer to-day about that funny lawsuit we spoke of."

Ross's eyes flashed fury. "I have not," he said, angrily. "It's just the contrary. I know the parties who will laugh on the wrong side of their countenances. But I see this is some of your joking that you picked up at Homburg, where they stripped you nicely, my fine friend."

The Bunnets and other City people listened, wondering, but could make nothing of what they heard. This might be the talk of high society; so they held themselves in suspense. At any rate, it was time for "the ladies to retire," and Mrs. Tillotson gladly rose.

When the gentlemen came up an hour later, Mr. Nelgrove was asking the captain privately, "Who, now, could you tell me, is that man Ross? Very odd, very odd indeed."

"Ah, bless you," said the captain, "that's all gag, as we may call it. The pair are always going on that way together—at it morning, noon, and night. A sort of quizzing, you know."

"O, quizzing!" said the other, doubtfully. "But I declare I thought he was in good earnest."

Mr. Grainger stole over to Mrs. Tillotson as soon as he entered. "Would you show me your new piano?" he said. "Who is the maker? I am longing to see it." And Mr. Tillotson's eyes followed them over into the next room. "We have been on a volcano since you left us," said Grainger, in a low voice. "It passes belief all we have gone through. Ross is losing his senses, I believe; and, though I say it, really only for me—"

"This is growing dreadful," she said, putting her hands to her face in sore distress.

"When the ladies went, his only restraint was gone. He contradicted nearly every word your husband said. Mr. Tillotson, I must say, bore it with admirable temper. 'What can he know of pictures,' he said, 'who has lived in a hole of a bank all his life? Now, of course, he has come out into civilised life, but it will take time and training to civilise him to that extent.' Then he went on to become worse. I am afraid he

has been drinking more than he ought. At last I think your husband lost his temper, and I must say answered him with spirit. Set him down quite. You see, Ross is in a sulk. He is brooding over it."

Ross was in this state, and now came over to them. "When did you begin to take interest in pianos?" he said. "Is that the way to attend to your guests, Mrs. Tillotson? As for your husband, he has insulted me down-stairs, and, by Heavens, he shall answer it. He thinks, because he throws his *mess* down here before me, because he gives us a glass of miserable wine that he don't know how to choose, he can treat me as he likes. Another minute, and I would have thrown it in his face. He supposes he can insult me."

"You insulted him. Grossly insulted him," said Grainger.

"I did not," said the other, fiercely. "What is it to you, if I did? Look at him now, peering over here with his pious face—the sweet suffering Joseph! And to insult me before this pack of low cockneys, too! I'll have it out with him, and make him apologise on his knees, and in this very room."

"O Ross, Ross," she said, in a low voice of anguish, "will nothing have any effect on you? You are making me more and more wretched every hour."

"That comes well from you," he said. "You may thank yourself for all this. Everything I do now is your own work. Recollect that."

Mr. Nelgrove came sidling over. "Shall we not hear the instrument?" he said, gaily. "Here's Mr. Bunnett really a judge. Ask him"—Mr. Bunnett was rolling down slowly—"ask him if he would take a twenty-pound note for his piano—just do, for the fun of the thing. I think, Bunnett, it was twenty-five pound ten you gave for that satin-wood piano, with the gold and the carvings, eh?"

Mr. Bunnett smiled good humouredly and modestly.

"Didn't Erard tell you," went on Nelgrove, "it was the cheapest in his shop?" Then, in a low whisper to Mrs. Tillotson, "Gave five hundred for it! Saw the cheque myself."

Thus those rooms, not very large as they were, had become a theatre of human passions. Several plays were going on together: suspense, anxiety, doubt, distrust, resentment, intrigue, faded conventionality; yet over the surface a roseate complacency that all around was smooth, conventional, and going on cheerfully.

In the midst of this Mrs. Tillotson played. ("They have a full grand at Bulmer," Mr. Nelgrove whispered under the back of his hand to the captain, "that would fill a church;" news utterly unintelligible to the captain, who thought a full grand might be a foreign officer of some kind, and said, "Yes. Have they, now?") When she had done, and had risen softly, it had grown late. Mrs. Bunnett, between whom and Mrs. Tilney no approximation had taken place, was rustling her rich silk noisily. Mrs. Tillotson had risen, and was softly walking

into the front room, when, at the door of the back drawing-room, a servant came in with a card on a salver. She met him so suddenly, that, with an instinct, she took it from him.

Grainger alone saw the look of doubt and abject agony that came into her face, and saw, too, the way she crushed the card up in her hand—saw, too, the hesitating way she stopped, turned back, and went on again, as if she knew not what to do. In a moment he was at her side, with a smile on his face, as if he was still speaking of the piano. In another moment Mr. Tillotson, turning restlessly, observed him take the card from her hand, then whisper something, and, with a nod of intelligence, leave the room.

Down-stairs, Mr. Bowler, not yet retired, said to his colleagues that it was "out of all resein" to have "fellers" like that coming at "unregular" hours—a feller that was there twice afore that day to his knowledge. A feller, too, if he had any acquaintance with ladies and gents at the Manshun 'Us or elsewhere, was no more of a gennelman than that 'ere boot-jack. What was he in the front parlour now for, with the other gent, along o' the coats and 'ats a *hinterfering*? There, the ladies and gents are a coming down." They were indeed—and "the gent" and Grainger came out in good time, according to Mr. Bowler's view. So there really was no "*hinterfering*" with the coats and hats.

They were all descending, Mrs. Bunnett's dress rustling and crackling, like ships under heavy sail. The Bunnetts' carriage was waiting, about which Mr. Nelgrove, pleasantly facetious to the end, would have his jest. "You've seen, I suppose," he said to Mr. Tilney, "our friend's tumble-down old Brougham which he bought second-hand? It's coming up now. And the horse, which he got cheap out of a cab. O yes." But this was not so successful, for the night was dark, and the scene confused and unsuited to irony, and this second-hand view of things came naturally enough to Mr. Tilney, and did not seem so far-fetched an idea. At last they were all gone.

Now as the last carriage drove off, and Mr. Tillotson and Mrs. Tillotson are standing alone in the drawing-room, he began at once, excitedly: "I cannot endure this any longer. It is too much—far too much. I have been as enduring as self-respect will allow; but there is a point beyond which we are not to go. But, at any rate, I can't do it. I can do no more. I have suffered enough."

With her eyes raised from the ground, and in which there was the old irresistible devotional expression, she said: "It is quite true, indeed. Yes; such restraint is too noble."

"Yes," he said, bitterly, "too soft and foolish. It was a wonderful spectacle. You would not match it; but I am sick of it. I am not called on to make these sacrifices. What is that man to me, with the mysteries of those with him?"

They may have their reasons, but I have not, and have no connexion with them. I am not to be pointed at—disgraced—as a weak, foolish creature, that any one can laugh at, for him and his friends. I have seen enough of this wretched life to-night to sicken me. But I think it high time to begin and look to myself now, in the true selfish and proud way, after looking to every one else all my life."

Now that he at last looked at her, she stood before him like a sweet penitent, utterly overwhelmed and miserable. The old St. Alans light seemed of a sudden to rise about, the old St. Alans music to fill the air.

"O," he said, suddenly, "forgive me! I know not what I am talking about. I am a wretched, miserable man, that deserves all, all. O, if you knew what I have suffered to-night in a hundred ways, you would be indulgent and pity me. But because my heart has been wrung I must vent it all on your soul. What do you think of me?" The light of joy that came back into her face reassured him. "I talk folly and wickedness when I talk of suffering. I am only too happy—more than I deserve. And while it lasts, while you remain to me, I should be indeed content. But mind," he said, and the old doubt came back into his face, "if once *that* be taken from me, if they succeed in weakening the only link that brings me to the joys of life, I am lost indeed. You will not let them. It is folly, but I cannot help it."

Now came in Mr. Bowler to look after the lights. The impression in his mind was that the host and hostess were talking with delight on the successful way in which everything had "gone off," and were overpowered with satisfaction at the glimpse they had had of "Manshun 'Us" festivities. A good deal of the success, he thought, might be set down to his exertions; and he thought it rather ill bred that no acknowledgment—often made affably at the "Manshun 'Us" by the Lord Mayor himself—had been tendered on this occasion. But host and hostess were so selfishly absorbed in discussing the feast for their own glorification, that they took no notice of Mr. Bowler, which, as that gentleman said the following evening at a real City dinner, "was only the way of the world."

Thus closed a day which was the beginning of the working out of a strange change in that house.

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